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INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO



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"Cecilia! Your aim—"

*A long-ago conversation. A bond still strong,
And a shot toward the future.*

"—is perfect!"



*"I'd like to thank you all for
gathering here this evening to celebrate
Cecilia Alcott's birthday."*



As befits its name, its armor glitters a vibrant gold color. The "Prominence" whips can, in addition to use as a weapon, be spun at a high speed for use as a shield. Further defensive capabilities are provided by the "Prominence Coat" heat barrier. Golden Dawn's tail is equipped with a claw for grappling, biting attacks, and use as a third arm in melee combat.

The resonance of the Revive-based third generation IS "Cosmos" and Charlotte's personal Radio Revive Custom II resulted in a fusion of IS—creating the world's only dual-core IS. Weapons from each carried over, most notably the "Vertu II" hybrid rifle with both kinetic and energy firing modes. The Cosmos had been armed with the "Vertu" hybrid rifle to counter the Revive's strong defenses against kinetic weaponry, but this weapon was evolved further by the fusion process, increasing its ability to penetrate enemy armor with rapid-fire bursts. In combination with the 15-barreled "Tarrasque" shotgun, the Rein Carnation's loadout brings Charlotte's hit-and-run style of mobile combat to new heights.

Meaning: Black Twig
Model: Sz.01
Generation: Third
Country: Germany
Classification:
Long-Range-Capable
Melee Fighter

Equipment:
20x Wired Blades
"Nacht Nacht" ("Night Night"), 88 Caliber Rifle
"Sturm und Drang" ("Storm and Stress"), Spiked Baghnakhs
Armor: Lunametal Honeycomb Armor (Anti-Penetration)
Features: Active Inertial Canceller (Offensive Optimization)
Standby Mode: Legband

Meaning:
Flower of Rebirth
Model: RinC-codoXX
Generation: Third
Country: France
Classification:
Intermediate-Range
Multi-Role IS

Equipment:
"Le Bouclier de Petale" ("Shield of Petals"), Energy Shield
"Vertu II" ("Vertus II"), 48 Caliber Hybrid Dual Rifle
"J'aray et Hyde" Dual Moles Blades
"Tarrasque", 28-Dauge 15-Barrel Shotgun
"Grey Scale II", Dual Pin Burner
Third Generation Multi-Wing Thruster
Armor: Hybrid Shock-Absorbent Third-Gen Armor / "Flourishes" ("Blooms"), Layered Superfluid
Features: Dual-Core, High Expansion Blob Capacity (With High-Speed Call), Separable Components (As Controlled Drone)
Standby Mode: Pendant

Exia Caliburn Right



left Chelsea Blankett





Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS. Personal IS: Byakushiki



Shinonono Houki

Ichika's childhood friend.
Personal IS: Akatsubaki



Cecilia Alcott

The British National Cadet.
Personal IS: Blue Tears



Huang Lingyin

The Chinese National Cadet.
Personal IS: Shenlong



Charles Dunois

The French National Cadet.

Personal IS: Rafale Revive Custom II



Laura Bodewig

The German National Cadet.

Personal IS: Schwarzer Regen



Tatenashi Sarashiki

IS Academy Student Council President.

Personal IS: Mysterious Lady



Kanzashi Sarashiki

Japanese National Cadet.

Personal IS: Uchigane Nishiki

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Prologue: The Girl's Awakening, The Holy Sword's Gleam

Hollow, nameless emptiness. A barren nothingness. A sea of silence underneath an anti-glowing sky.

“System boot...”

Beep. Beep. Whirrrr...

“Coordinate correction minus zero-point-four. Duplex signal established. Moving to zero point.”

Command after command flowed through her databanks. Her eyes opened, looking out over the endless void.

“Daisy, Daisy. Give me your answer, do.” Only her own ears heard her song as the blackness of the sky filled her vision. “Command protocol, priority mode. Activate Mode Excalibur.”

A countdown flashed before her eyes.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

...Zero.

The blade was unsheathed.



“This is Rain. Objective located. Moving to contact.”

“Sapphire. Moving in.”

Two girls in geosynchronous orbit had found their target: the hypercondensing plasma cannon, Excalibur. After falling under Phantom Task's sway, it had suddenly lost control and begun to shift from its orbit. In order to find the cause, they had been equipped with EVA packages and sent to infiltrate.

“This is...”

“What's going on? I've got a bad feeling about—”

With that, their signals were lost, and the gears of fates false and true began to turn...

Chapter N: Yule Be Here In No Time!

Christmas, Coming Soon

“Yay!”

The room filled with the cracks of party poppers. It was the IS Academy student council room, and Tatenashi popped open a fan while seated in her imposing chair.

“Um, why are we doing this, anyway?” Ichika was the only one there who looked a bit confused at what was going on.

“Well, it’s one day until December, so I figured we’d pregame or something.”

“Uh, okay...” Did Christmas really need pre-gaming? Especially when there was already Christmas Eve for that? “I guess it has gotten pretty chilly lately.”

It hadn’t snowed yet, but the temperatures were definitely dropping. The sun was setting earlier and earlier, too. Winter was coming.

“Orimu, have you started getting ready for Christmas? You know it’s the student council’s job to decorate the dorms and stuff, right?” Miss Casual asked. She was still definitely her airheaded self, but lately she’d been showing flashes of seriousness, to the surprise of the rest of the student council. “You haven’t, have you? I could tell. Why don’t we go shopping together, then? That’d be nice.”

Ever since Kyoto, Ichika and Miss Casual had been getting closer and closer, even outside of their student council duties. A fact which was beginning to concern both Kanzashi and Tatenashi.

“Honne... I’ll come along too.”

“Why don’t I come along as well? Wouldn’t that be fun? Wouldn’t it?”

Ichika, though, completely failed to notice. “That’d be kind of a mess to set up. Why don’t just me and Miss Casual go?” he said without a second thought.

The Sarashikis couldn’t exactly argue with him about it straight-up, but—

“There were a lot of things I wanted to look at, actually...”

“Oh, definitely! There was something heavy I was looking at, it’d be wonderful if I had a nice strong man along to carry it.”

They were some weak excuses, but they were enough for Ichika.

“Good points. Guess it’s the four of us then!” Miss Casual was grinning, the Sarashikis were self-satisfied, and Ichika was blissfully

oblivious.

“Really, though, wow. Is it already December?” A lot had happened this year that he needed to unpack.

“Anyway, let’s go shopping tomorrow, then!” Tatenashi snapped open a fan, revealing the word ‘Sunday.’



“It’s been a long time since the student council’s gone out as a group, hasn’t it.” Ichika thought to himself aloud as he waited at the station. As usual, he had just thrown on his IS Academy uniform. They’d changed over to winter uniforms, but it was still a bit chilly.

“There you are, Orimu!” Miss Casual was wearing a squirrel hoodie. She’d worried a bit about what to wear today—not that anyone else could tell. “You’re wearing your uniform? Don’t you have anything else?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, but my uniform’s comfy too.”

“You stand out too much. Remember, you’re pretty much a pop star.” She was right. He’d already gotten a few requests for an autograph, and a few dozen for a selfie with him.”

“Am I really that famous?”

“Of course you are! You’re the only boy at IS Academy!”

It was beginning to sink in for him.

“So I should probably change into something else, then. I’d have to go back to the dorms, though.”

“Why don’t we just go buy you something else? Doesn’t that sound good?”

“Huh? Don’t we have to wait for Tatenashi and Kanzashi?”

“I’ll just text them. C’mon, let’s go!”

Ichika followed along without much protest. But from the shadows nearby, the Sarashikis watched with a sense of impending doom.

“This is bad. Isn’t it, Kanzashi?”

“Yeah... Real bad...”

Having arrived a little bit later, they hurried to catch up with Ichika and Miss Casual. It wasn’t hard, as she had mentioned which shop they were going to in her text.

“Oh, hey, Kanzashi, Tatenashi! Orimu’s changing right now.” They weren’t quite sure just how naturally they’d played it off, but at least the potential for the day turning into a date between Ichika and Miss Casual had been averted.

As relief washed over them, Ichika returned in a new outfit and carrying a small box.

“Here, Miss Casual. As thanks for the clothes... Wait, when did Tatenashi and Kanzashi get here?!” The guilt over buying a present for just Miss Casual, not Tatenashi or Kanzashi, was visible on his face.

“Er, uh, it wasn’t supposed to be special or anything...”

Tatenashi, true to form, took pleasure in needling him over it saying, “Well, if it’s not something special, I’d imagine you’re getting something for us too, right?”

“Yeah... I’d like something...” Kanzashi joining in left him even more on the back foot.

“Well, um...”

“I mean, Christmas presents *are* a thing.”

“Ichika, I’d like the Blu-ray boxset of *Iron Guy*...” Kanzashi was, in essence, begging for 49,000 yen (plus tax). It must have been very awkward for her.

“Orimu, can I open this now?” Miss Casual’s eyes gleamed as she looked at her present. Ichika glanced nervously at the Sarashikis, but then nodded to Miss Casual.

“Yeah, go ahead. It’s nothing big.”

“Wow, a bracelet! Thanks so much, Orimu! I love it!” She pulled a silver bracelet from the box and threaded it around her wrist. Its silver glimmer offset her natural... Well, casualness, nicely.

“Ugh, this is just too much, Kanzashi!”

“Y-Yeah... This is gonna be trouble.”

As the Sarashikis stewed, Miss Casual took Ichika’s hand and skipped off.

“All right, let’s go shopping!”

“Okay.”

It was the start of a very busy day.



After they’d done the shopping for the student council, the four decided to get a quick lunch before getting their personal shopping out of the way. They were at a place known as the ‘best burger joint in town,’ a place they’d all been before. And this being a weekend, it was packed. After a four or five minute wait, they brought their trays over to an empty table.

“Hey, Tatenashi. Remember when you used to just sit here, thinking there was table service?”

Tatenashi’s face went red as Miss Casual’s first strike hit, just as she’d taken a bite and was unable to reply.

“Wh-Why are you talking about that now? That was forever ago!” she protested.

“Ahahah. Weren’t you a prim little princess.”

Ichika’s words earned him a flick to the forehead.

“Don’t tease your elders!”

Kanzashi, on the other hand, had—at least by Miss Casual’s description—learned by watching that she had to order at the counter.

“And then you tried to eat your burger with a knife and fork!” Miss Casual giggled.

“Come on! Stop bringing up things from when I was a little kid!” Tatenashi was mortally embarrassed, but Ichika was reading it as playfulness, and wasn’t about to jump in and change the subject.

“...You want in her pants that badly?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing! Nothing at all!” Tatenashi took another bite of her cheeseburger, resigned now to letting the conversation go where it would. It was rare, and intriguing, for Ichika to see her like that.

“You’re blushing...”

“Oh my. Kanzashi, do you want to go there? Do you really want to go there?”

“...This is what I get for sticking my nose in.”

Smirking, Tatenashi struck straight for her sister’s weak points, she was a master at sinking her fangs in, and said, “Did Kanzashi ever tell you, Ichika? She can’t stand pickles.”

“Oh, really?”

As Ichika’s attention turned, it was Kanzashi’s turn to make a flustered denial.

“That was just when I was a little kid!” she cried out as she slid her burger out of sight.

“When you were a little kid? Didn’t you order that one without pickles, too?”

“C’mon, Kanzashi!”

Once the gloves were off, they were off, and Tatenashi had the upper hand.

“I guess you still have a lot of growing up to do.” Tatenashi winked, while Kanzashi puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough. Let’s finish eating and get back to shopping.”

“Yeah, good idea. People are starting to notice you, Orimu.”

“Huh, they are.” Ichika finally realized that the crowd around them was beginning to take pictures. The four finished their burgers and quickly made their way out. They hadn’t expected to be followed out, but—Alas! Such naïveté!—the crowd moved as one behind them.

“That was Orimura Ichika!”

“He looks even better in person!”

“I wonder if I can get an autograph?”

As the excited shouting grew louder, they attempted to make their escape. Easier said than done, when even the girls were minor celebrities in their own right.

“There they are!” Ichika and the Sarashikis tensed up at the sudden shout, only to relax when they realized it was Miss Casual.

“They went that way!”

“Really? Where to?!”

“The lingerie shop.”

“Omigawd, we’ve gotta catch up!” A crowd of middle school girls roared past.

As Ichika and the girls let out a sigh of relief, they heard an announcement for the mall’s weekend hero show come over the PA: “The Iron Guy hero show is about to start in the courtyard!”

A chime sounded as the announcement faded away. Immediately, Kanzashi’s eyes brightened.

“Let’s go, Ichika!” Her eyes gleamed as she dragged him off.

“Wait, Kanzashi, was this why you wanted to come?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

She was so insistent that not just Ichika, but Tatenashi and Miss Casual, felt compelled to come along. And that’s how, five minutes later, they found themselves in a packed courtyard as the show began.

“Is everyone having fun?”

“Yeah!” Kanzashi’s voice rang out in unison with the children in the crowd.

“Then let’s give our hero a warm welcome! Iron Guy!”

“Iron Guy!”

The lady MCing craned her head, as if the calls weren’t quite loud enough.

“Ichika! You do it too!”

“Uh, okay.” Ichika nodded at Kanzashi’s insistent prodding.

“Let’s hear it again! Iron Guy!”

“Iron Guy!!”

As Ichika reluctantly added his voice to the chorus, the hero, Iron Guy, made his appearance.

“Hey, kids! It’s me, Iron Guy! Looks like some of you brought your dads today!” Ichika cringed into his seat at the idea that he was a dad. Meanwhile, Kanzashi was really getting into it.

“Today I’ll get to touch him!” She was really looking forward to the standard high-five with the hero at the end of the show.

Next to her, Tatenashi was feeling a mix of awkward confusion and amused enthusiasm.

“Ugh! Enemies already? Looks like a hero doesn’t get weekends off!” From nowhere, a villain and his henchmen appeared.

“Gahaha, Iron Guy! Today I’ll finally finish you off!”

“No chance, Master X! You’ll never win!”

The henchmen leapt around on stage before dispersing into the crowd. As they reached Ichika’s group, they knew they’d found their mark—but set aback by the intensity of Kanzashi’s raw emotion, they

chose Miss Casual instead.

“Come with us...! Please.”

“Kaaay!” Following their whispered instructions, Miss Casual was led away to join a group of children on stage.

“Bwahaha! You can’t fight me now, Iron Guy!”

“Curse you, Master X! That’s no fair!”

Boos erupted from the crowd.

“Silence! What else is a villain supposed to do?” He leveled a sword at his hostages as the high-pitched murmurs of the crowd of children rose. Miss Casual stood out like a sore thumb.

“Everyone! Give the hero your strength! Call out his name!” The MC wasn’t quite sure how to deal with a (more, at least) grown-up participant, but was trying her hardest to keep things on script. “Get ready...”

“Orimu, save me!” Miss Casual shouted while waving her hand, utter bliss on her face.

“Uh, Orimu?” The MC was visibly taken off guard. Tatenashi and Kanzashi weren’t *saying* ‘goddammit’ in a crowd of children, but they sure looked like they wanted to. Meanwhile, Ichika covered his face with both hands.

“Orimu is Orimura Ichika! Everyone’s hero!”

At least that was a name the MC recognized. Her eyes lighting up, she jumped right back into gear. “Orimura Ichika? That’s even better!”

“Huh? Wait, isn’t Iron Guy everyone’s hero?” Iron Guy and Master X alike were at a loss.

But the MC’s voice arose. “All right, everyone! Call out his name! Orimura Ichika!”

“Orimura Ichika!” the children answered.

With nowhere to run, Ichika chose to act.

“Hi-yaaaaaah!” Shouting, he leapt at Master X with a jump kick.

The day ended as tumultuously as it had begun.

Chapter I: Knights of the Round

“Phew...” A beautiful young Englishwoman with golden locks—Cecilia Alcott, that is—was relaxing in the girls’ baths, her slender waist visible through the crystal-clear water. “Well. It certainly isn’t home, but it’s nice enough.”

She let out a long, relaxed sigh.

It’s December already. December 4th, to be exact. Her birthday was in 20 days. *I’ll be sixteen...* The first step on the path to adulthood. Just thinking about it made her heart pound.

“Jeez, Shiny! Stop running!” She was supposed to have the bath to herself, but suddenly, she heard Ichika’s voice from the changing room.

“I-Ichika?!”

“Gah! You scratched me?! Even Chifuyu never scratched me!” The bumps and thumps of their squabble drowned out Cecilia’s voice. It seemed like the cat who was Ichika’s new roommate was rather moody. Just when it seemed like they were getting used to each other, they were at it again like, well, cats and dogs.

This is my chance! Er, wait, no, this is a mess! Ah well. If I wait in the shower room, he’ll be done soon enough.

Splash... Rattle.

“Huh?”

“C’mon, Shiny! Knock it—Wait, what?” Just as Cecilia stood up to go to the shower room, Ichika ran in, chasing his cat. “Cecilia?! Wait, I didn’t mean to—”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!” Cecilia’s nails raked across his face.





'I'm a loser who peeks into the girls' shower.' So read the placard hanging from Ichika's neck as he sat in the hallway of the first year dorm. Ugly red scratches trailed across his face, from Shiny over his right eye and from Cecilia over his left.

"How stupid can you get?!" As soon as Ling heard what had happened, she made sure to be the first one there. "Sneaking into the girls' shower and peeking on Cecilia? I can't even think of anything worse! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

As she spoke, Ling kicked Ichika over and over. It hurt emotionally as much as it did physically.

"Ichika! I can't believe you!" Next was Houki, her hand gripping a real katana in rage. "Don't move an inch! The only mercy you deserve is an honorable death!"

It took Ichika half an hour to talk Houki out of 'assisting' him with seppuku. Meanwhile, they drew quite a crowd of international students excited to see 'authentic hara-kiri.' ...Yikes.

"Die." Laura said her one word and left. It was short, but decidedly not sweet.

"....." Charlotte's refusal to so much as look at him was even more painful.

"So you *are* a creep..."

"Jeez, I was wasting my time with you."

Kanzashi and Tatenashi teamed up for a combo attack.

"I always thought there was something off about you..."

"I never expected you to be that sex-crazed."

It was super effective!

"Bye-bye... creep."

"Goodbye, pervert Ichika."

Even Ichika realized that this was not the time to ask what a second year was doing in the first year dorms. The two stalked off as quickly as they'd arrived.

Last was Cecilia. *I wonder what she's gonna have to say...*

As Ichika waited nervously, Cecilia opened up in a completely unexpected way, "Er, Ichika..."

She seemed nervous. Vulnerable. Nothing like her normal self... As he kept those rude assumptions to himself, Cecilia finally made up her mind.

"L-Let's just pretend that didn't happen. So why don't we go here together? Just the two of us?" Nervously, she held out an all-day pass for the 'D-Land' theme park in Yokohama.

"Mm? Hmm?" Ichika couldn't quite figure out why *she* was asking *him* for something. Confused, he glanced up at her face. Her cheeks

were glowing.

“Y-You don’t want to?” Her shy disappointment stirred even Ichika’s heart.

“No, uh, I mean, yeah, I mean, no. Uh, I mean. Let’s go, yeah.” As Ichika nervously tried to find the right words, a beaming smile broke across Cecilia’s face.

Meanwhile, from the shadows, six stares drilled into the pair.

Did you hear that?

I sure did!

Loud and clear.

Indeed.

We’re going to have to...

We’re gonna have to tail them!

It was a date! ...Though under less-than-auspicious circumstances.



That weekend, Ichika waited by the entrance to D-Land in Yokohama. He’d suggested that, since they were both leaving from IS Academy, they might as well meet at the school gates, but Cecilia had other plans.

“If we did that, they’d be skulking— Er, I mean! For this kind of thing, isn’t it more romantic to meet there? Ohohoho.” She was insistent enough that, in the end, they set off separately.

She’s pretty late, though. It was already 20 minutes past when they’d planned on. He didn’t mind waiting, but he was a little worried that something might have happened to her on the way there.

“Jeez, sometimes Cecilia’s so sheltered.” As Ichika grumbled to himself, he heard a voice from behind.

“Oh my. Just who are you calling sheltered?” The smell of roses filled his nostrils as he spun around. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Ichika.”

The woman he faced was wearing a blue one-piece dress under a white coat, and her golden locks fanned out over it. Cecilia Alcott had arrived. She looked a bit different than normal, having chosen light pink lipstick. Ichika thought it made her look more mature.

“Cecilia!”

“Why, you still have bed head, Ichika!” She bemusedly reached out and patted his hair down. It was an entirely more practiced gesture than he was comfortable with.

“Huh, thought I smoothed that out before I left, hahaha.”

“Oho. You’re always in such a hurry.”

Ichika’s embarrassed grin was met with a kind, accepting smile. They were the picture of a happy couple, and the sheer bloodthirst in the glares from the shadows was palpable. But neither Ichika nor

Cecilia noticed.

“Shall we be going then, Ichika?” asked Cecilia, as she extended her hand.

Ichika theatrically accepted it and replied, “As you will, Milady.”

“Ahaha. Do be a gentleman and escort me.”

Hand in hand, they passed through the gates.



“Boyish good looks and a maiden’s heart! It’s famous detective Charlock Holmes!” A dramatic orchestra hit from somewhere.

“Charlock Holmes? Who’s that?” Kanzashi gulped nervously.

“A detective! ...No, no I’m not! Why are you making me do this? Why do I have to wear these clothes, anyway?! Do you really think I look that much like a guy? Really, that stings!” Charlotte was complaining, but she also looked every inch the part, right down to a calabash pipe and Inverness cape.

“Come on, Kanzashi! You’re wasting our time with this! We’ve already lost sight of Ichika and Cecilia!” If Charlotte was angry, Ling was furious.

“But Tatenashi told me to. Right, Tate—” Kanzashi turned to her side, only to see a Tatenashi dakimakura with a fan spread open on top of it.

“The early bird gets the worm.”

As the group realized the meaning of Tatenashi’s sudden absence, howls of despair arose from the tall grass they’d hidden themselves in.

“She got us!”



“What do you wanna do first, Cecilia?”

“Well. I’ve not been to many amusement parks, so I suppose I’ll leave that to you.”

“Hmm. I wonder what’s not going to be too busy around now.” Ichika’s brow furrowed as he looked at a map of D-Land. Noticing, Cecilia wrapped her arm around his.

“Well, the dog park sounds interesting,” replied Cecilia. How effortlessly she did it made Ichika’s heart pound. Her warmth, along with the softness of her bosom as it brushed against him, was almost too much.

“Dogs, huh? You like dogs, Cecilia?” Ichika awkwardly struggled to make conversation.

“Why, of course. Shelties are practically a national icon. Their fluffy coat, their clever smiles, their adorable playfulness. Aren’t they wonderful? But—” Cecilia continued, “All doggies are good boys. I

simply can't decide on a favorite."

Ichika was surprised. When they'd first met, she'd definitely been of the type to insist that British breeds were superior. She'd definitely had some rough edges smoothed off. No, more than that, she'd become more flexible. Both in her thoughts and in her perceptions.

"Do you have a dog, Cecilia?"

"Sadly, no. Chelsea is always showing me pictures, though."

"I see. Chelsea, you said?"

As Ichika nodded to himself, Cecilia pressed even closer. "Oh, are you interested in her? That's too bad. I don't believe she finds younger men attractive."

"I didn't mean—"

"I'm only kidding, dear."

Between the teasing and the closeness of her body, Ichika could barely talk straight.

"Anyway, shall we be going?" asked Cecilia.

"Yeah, uh, sure. But calm down a little, okay?"

"Surely you'd expect British nobility to always live life to its fullest."

"Maybe, but I'm just some Japanese kid..."

As they joked back and forth, Ichika and Cecilia made their way to the dog park.

"Coming through, coming through, sorry about that!" A park janitor pressed their way between Ichika and Cecilia with a broom. Between the cap, the sunglasses, and the flu mask, it was almost a perfect disguise. The only flaw was one telltale lock of wavy ice-blue hair poking out.

"Huh? Whoa, what are you doing?" Ichika asked, as he moved aside.

"How rude," griped Cecilia.

Luckily for Tatenashi, it wasn't enough to give the game away. She made her escape while she could.

"What the heck was that?"

"....."

"Now what?"

As they continued on, they came upon the park mascot, Dobonta, standing in their path.

[Hey there, I'm Dobonta! Let's dance!]

"Whaa?!"

The mascot grabbed Ichika's hand and pulled him away from Cecilia. A familiar-looking ponytail poked out from the neckline of its costume.

"What on earth are you doing?! This has to be some kind of human rights violation!"

[Dobonta doesn't!]

[Have a!]

[Human inside!]

A line of mascots made their appearance, languidly clutching balloons in their paws.

"Jigen Dobonta. The gunman with a zero-point-three second draw. Howdy, pardner."

"Ishikawa Dobonta. I can cleave anything in twain. *Anything.*"

"Mine Dobonko. Is she your best friend? Or your worst enemy?"

Hand in hand, they spun Cecilia around.

"Ahahahaha."

"This is D-Land, where dreams come true!"

"Let's dance together!"

A dream? A nightmare? An endless waltz.

("All right!"—Ling)

("Almost got it!"—Charlotte)

("All according to plan!"—Laura)

The creepy, inhuman laughter echoed around Cecilia. Just as she felt like she was about to drown in that inhuman cackling, a burst of blue light surrounded her. "Stop that! I'm Cecilia Alcott! I don't have to take this!"

Opening Blue Tears, she blew away the three Dobontas which had appeared in front of her, before wrapping her arms around Ichika and pulling him back from the one which was attempting to kidnap him.

"Wait, this is—"

A princess carry, of all things. Nothing could have embarrassed Ichika more.

"We need to shake them off! Just hold on!"

Cecilia's breasts were pressing into his face, and the close contact made Ichika blush all the way to the tips of his ears.

"I see a way!"

"I, uh, I'm seeing something too..."

".....?"

Ichika pressed hard on his nose.



"Why, they're adorable!" Cecilia smiled happily at the circle of dogs around her. It was a mass of tiny, cute little things—Dachshunds, Pomeranians, Chihuahuas, Papillons, Yorkies, and more, all yapping energetically.

Meanwhile, Ichika...

"Grrrrrr..." Growls arose from the Dobermans, Siberian Huskies, and other hounds around him.

"Ugh, I guess I'm just one of those people who animals don't like."

He sighed.

As he did, Cecilia took his hand. “Don’t worry. You just need to convince them that you’re their friend. See, like this.”

Cecilia reached out a hand to scratch a husky under its chin, and the growling immediately stopped.

“Wow.”

“Hahaha. All it takes is a kind heart.” Cecilia smiled.

Meanwhile, Ichika was reminded of something. “Isn’t there some old English saying about getting a dog after you get married?”

“No, it’s after you have children.” Just the mention made Cecilia’s cheeks flush red and left Ichika at a loss for words.

“Oh, huh. Ahahaha.”

“Funny, isn’t it.”

Gazes from the brush nearby watched their afternoon get better and better.



“What do we do?! They’re having a great time!” Ling stomped her feet.

“What am I supposed to do about that?” Houki was beginning to lose hope.

“The costumes were a failure.” Charlotte sighed as she pulled off her Dobonta mask.

“That’s okay. At least it was fun.” Laura stood, her arms crossed.

“Our next plan is...” Kanzashi excitedly opened a projection display in midair.

“This is—!” The others gasped.

“I call it the ‘Haunted House Horror Holler Hour!’” Okay, maybe the name was a bit iffy.



“Why don’t we have something for lunch?”

“Of course! Actually, I made something and brought it with me.”

For a moment, Ichika thought they’d have too much, but he decided to keep this thought to himself. Instead, he pulled out his own lunch sack.

“So did I, actually. Why don’t we trade?” As he did, he winced. His lunch was a loaf of French bread hollowed out and filled with tuna salad and onions. It was sliced into discs, sort of like a Westernized sushi roll. That much was fine. The problem was the ‘French’ part.

“...You know what, actually, why don’t we just have our own.”

He belatedly tried to retract the offer, but Cecilia just chuckled.

“Too late now, tee-hee.” She swiftly snatched the wrapped loaf

from his hands.

“And you can have this.” It was replaced with a delicious-looking rice ball.

Ichika couldn’t argue with that smile, and he sat down to eat. “I made tea, too. Though yours is probably better.”

“I brought green tea! Perhaps we could trade those as well.” Cecilia pulled out a bottle and handed it to him.

“Let’s eat.”

“Yes, let’s eat.”

They bit into their lunches.

“Mmm! This is great!” The rice ball was perfectly salted, and the savory flavor of its seaweed wrapper filled Ichika’s mouth, along with the tart sweetness of first-rate Kii Province umeboshi. With ingredients like that, it had to be good.

“Yours is quite nice, too.” Cecilia seemed to be satisfied with the ersatz Western sushi roll. The onion added a bit of tanginess to the tuna salad, and he’d made it with imported mayo, which uses whole eggs, rather than Japanese mayo which uses only yolks, to make sure that it wasn’t too heavy. “Oh dear, Ichika. You have some rice on you.”

“Huh, where?”

“Right here.” Cecilia stretched out her fingers and plucked it from his cheek before popping it into her own mouth. It was enough to make the people around them jealous. Especially the cluster of Dobontas.

“What the hell! Ichika’s never that nice with me!” Ling cried out.

“Me either!” Houki chimed in.

“He’s being way too lovey-dovey,” whined Charlotte.

“Unforgivable. I should end them where they stand,” Laura said, as she resisted the urge to reveal herself.

“I think I remember a scene like this from an anime...” muttered Kanzashi. You could almost see the rage emanating from them, even through the costumes.

As they glowered, Tatenashi, in a new disguise, approached Ichika and Cecilia.

“Hi there, you two! Did you know? We’re giving away free tickets to the haunted house for couples today! Here you go!” Tatenashi forcibly pressed the tickets into their hands before leaving again.

That, at least, earned a thumbs-up from the Dobontas.

“Now, just what should we have waiting for them,” Ling asked, her eyes gleaming and an indomitable grin—like that of a certain third-generation gentleman thief—plastered across her face.



“So this is the haunted house?” Cecilia asked. The name aside, it had become the fashion to have more than just a spooky old building. Cobwebs and creaky stairs were so out of date. And D-Land was no exception.

“Is it just my imagination, or is like no one else here?”

Tatenashi had done a very good job clearing out the other park attendees, but Ichika and Cecilia had no reason to know that. As for the haunted house, it was done up like an abandoned hospital. Even the outside looked foreboding.

“So I suppose we go in?”

“Hm? You’re not scared or anything, Cecilia?”

“Of course not. Anything I can shoot, I can handle. They’ll need more than zombies or whatever to scare me.” Cecilia formed her hand into the shape of a gun. It wasn’t particularly girlish, but it was appealing in its own right.

“So you’re okay with horror stuff?” Ichika tried to think of who *would* be scared by it, and could only come up with Tatenashi. For all the airs she put on, she definitely couldn’t deal with this kind of thing. *Not really who you’d expect, now that I think of it.* As he stifled a laugh, Cecilia frowned at him.

“Why, Ichika! Are you thinking of other girls?”

“Well, uhh...”

Ichika tried to play it off, but Cecilia just chuckled and led him by his hand.

“Well, I don’t know who just had your imagination right now, but I’ve had your hand all day so I suppose I can’t complain.”

“If that’s all it takes to make you happy.” Ichika laughed, too. Meanwhile, the six watching from the shadows were almost ready to explode.

“Ichika, you... You twerp!”

“I can’t. I just can’t. I’m gonna kill him. I’m gonna kill him and dump the body in the ocean.”

“Ichika, you philanderer!”

“We’ll use him for target practice. Target practice is completely legal.”

“No more, Ichika! No more...!”

“You really hate to see Ichika like that, don’t you. Especially lately.” Tatenashi was fishing for agreement, and she got it with a round of nods.

“Anyway, let’s drag them to the very pits of terror! Ahaha, ahahahahaha!” At the signal of Ling’s maniacal laughter, they took up their positions.



"It's rather dim in here." Cecilia was still holding Ichika's hand.

"Watch your step."

"Of course. I'll be fine." Cecilia was, after all, a proud sniper.

Suddenly, a mummy wrapped in bandages leapt out at them. ...A mummy with a bokken.

"Roarrrrrrr!" It swung its wooden blade to and fro as it approached, creating an atmosphere that was less spooky and more just plain terrifying. Realizing the danger they were in, Ichika and Cecilia fled to the next room.

"Awooooooooo!" A person in a wolf's skin suddenly leapt onto Ichika's back. And immediately bit his head. The ceramic fangs cut into his scalp.

"Oww!"

"What on Earth are you doing?!" Cecilia quickly pulled the wolfman (?) off him with a judo throw, only for it to leap off the wall and back at her.

"Awooooooooooooooooo!" *I'm gonna kill you, Cecilia! I'll kill you, and then I won't have to pay you back!* Ling had fallen into the habit of forgetting her wallet when she went out, and was quickly racking up quite the debt. Not that she *couldn't* pay it. National cadets were given a stipend that was more than decent. Ling just had the bad habit of forgetting her wallet. Back in middle school, she'd done the same thing with Ichika.

"Let's get out of here, Ichika!" Cecilia yelled.

"Y-Yeah!" Ichika fled the room, hand in hand with Cecilia, only to encounter a chainsaw-wielding giant in the hallway with a familiar-looking mask. The growl of the chainsaw engine was scary all on its own.

Let's go, Laura!

Got it!

Inside the costume, Laura rode on Charlotte's shoulders.

Rrrrrrrrrr! The chainsaw's low-pitched mechanical roar echoed off the walls, but Cecilia didn't flinch at all.

"How rude."

Bang! A gunshot rang out.

"Wait, Cecilia! You brought a gun?!"

Bang! Bang! Cecilia smiled as the shots rang out.

"Only something small for self-defense." The 9mm Browning Hi-Power, as issued to 007, may or may not have actually been 'small' or 'for self-defense.' But who was going to argue, when it was in her hand?

"Ohoho." Cecilia grinned as she opened fire, to Ichika's nervous surprise.

Laura! Let's get out of here!

No! The punishment for cowardice in the face of the enemy is death by firing squad!

As they squabbled inside the suit, they fell to the floor with a thud.

“Well, that’s settled. Now let’s get out of here.”

“Uh, okay.”



“One plate, two plates...” Kanzashi, not realizing that their route had completely avoided her, sat alone counting plates.



It was evening. Ichika and Cecilia looked down from a Ferris wheel as the orange rays of sunset washed over the amusement park, alone together in a small cabin. It was only natural that, so close together, their thoughts would turn to each other.

“Such a beautiful view,” Cecilia sighed, looking every bit the proper young lady.

“Yeah...”

She frowned at Ichika’s fascination with the scenery and muttered, “You were supposed to say something like ‘not as beautiful as you,’ you know.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing!”

As Cecilia pouted and turned away, Ichika reached out a hand and cupped her cheek.

“Don’t frown like that. You’re beautiful too, Cecilia.”

“...Ah?” It was like she’d always dreamed. She hesitated, barely believing her ears. “What did you just...”

Ichika pulled back his hand and smiled.

“Oh, nothing.” The gentle teasing sent Cecilia’s heart aflutter as her face flushed red. Shyly, awkwardly, embarrassedly, angrily yet joyfully, she let her emotions swell over her.

“Er, Ichika... I... I—”

Just as she was about to finally put into words what she’d been feeling over the past year, a blaze of light streaked by the window.

“.....?!”

A hail of laser fire fell from the sky, setting the amusement park ablaze. It was more powerful than any IS was capable of, and crimson flames shot up around them as the fire began to spread.

“Cecilia!”

“On it!”

No more than half a breath later, their IS’ were opened and they

were helping rescue the confused park attendees.

“Stay calm! Don’t panic! Stay with your families!” The attack was over, but the fire was still spreading. A young girl, separated from her family, cried. “Mommy, Daddy, where are you? Wahhhhhh!”

Something about the girl reminded Cecilia of who she once was, and she swooped down, closing her IS as she took the girl in her arms and said, “Don’t worry. It’s okay. Your mommy and daddy are all right.”

The kindness of her smile was enough to calm the girl.

Half an hour later, the fire department finally arrived.

“Cecilia, are you okay?!”

“Ichika. I’m fine, but this girl was separated from her parents.” As she spoke, Cecilia brushed away the girl’s tears.

Ichika crouched down in front of the girl and looked her straight in the eye.

“What’s your name? I’ll help find your mom and dad,” he said to the girl.

“O-Okay... Ah!”

Even before Ichika could get an answer, her parents approached, drawn by the sound of her voice.

“Thank you so much. We don’t know if we could have gone on living without her.” The gratitude of her parents, in turn, took some of the tension from Ichika and Cecilia. At least things had turned out okay. That much was a relief. And as they did, a completely unexpected visitor arrived.

“So there you are, madam.”

“Er... Chelsea? Why are you here? I’d thought I’d left you a list of things to do in England.”

Chelsea’s head dipped sorrowfully, but her words were as cold as ice.

“I’ve come for you, madam. ...No. Cecilia Alcott.” A swelling of light formed around her.

“An IS?!”

And from the light, she emerged in BT Unit 03, Dive To Blue.

“Let us meet in England. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” In an instant, she disappeared into the heavens. It was Dive In Blue’s one-off ability In The Blue, but there was no reason for Ichika or Cecilia to know that.

“What the heck is going on?”

Cecilia, at a loss for words, trembled, her face ghostly pale. All Ichika could do was wrap an arm around her.

Chapter II: Over the Rainbow

Days later, Cecilia had decided to take her private jet to England to get to the root of the problem.

“This has to be a trap, Cecilia,” Ichika said.

“I know. But I can’t just ignore her.” Observatories had determined that the laser attack had come from orbit. But who had ordered them? How was Chelsea involved? Why was the third Blue Tears IS completed? The more which was revealed, the stranger the mysteries got. “So I’ve decided to return to England.”

“I’ll come too, then.” Ichika took her hand as he volunteered.

“Ichika... Thank you.” A trip for two to England, like she’d always planned—or not.

“I’m thirsty, Cecilia. Oh, is this a fridge? Lucky. Can I have a cola?”

“This sure feels different than just taking an IS.”

“A private jet, huh. Wow, you really are loaded.”

“Is this plane equipped with infrared sensors?”

“Can I have some chips...?”

“Wow, eating on a plane, Kanzashi?”

“Remember, class, you’re supposed to stay in your seats with your seat belts fastened.”

“Could I have a coffee, Ms. Yamada?”

The passenger list was the usual crew, with the addition of Ms. Yamada and Chifuyu.

“I understand why Ms. Orimura is here. And I understand why Ms. Yamada is along too. But the rest of you—” Cecilia half-screamed out of frustration. “What are you doing here?!”

The rest of the girls looked surprised at the question. ‘Girls,’ specifically. Not Ms. Yamada or Chifuyu.

“Well, you know... Houki?”

“Yeah. Right, Charlotte?”

“Of course! Isn’t that right, Laura?”

“Indeed. Kanzashi?”

“Well, um, err... Sis?” Tatenashi was nowhere to be seen. “Um... You know... Ichika, can you...?”

Somehow, even though he wasn’t expecting the conversation to turn to him, he had exactly the right answer.

“You’re all worried about Cecilia too, right?”

“I... I see... Very well, then.” Calmed by Ichika’s warm smile,

Cecilia sat back down.

Ten thousand meters in the air, crossing into eastern Europe...

“Again. Is this plane equipped with infrared sensors?”

“Huh? Why do you keep asking that, Laura?”

As they looked out the window behind Laura, they saw exactly why.

“A missile?!”

The roar of its warhead’s detonation shook the plane. Cecilia dove to cover the pilot, Ichika, and Chifuyu, as they opened their IS. They bailed out of the disabled plane, and as they did, a girl who’d just discarded a rocket launcher awaited them.

“Aww, that didn’t do the trick. Did it, now, Sarashiki Tatenashi?” Soaring in the skies alongside them was the previous Russian representative pilot, Rogna Kalinych. Her IS, Gustoi Tuman Rossiya, made that much clear.

“Well, that wasn’t what I wanted to do with my afternoon. Ichika!” Tatenashi snapped open a fan reading ‘go on ahead.’ “I’ll deal with that smirking old hag. Ms. Orimura, you take the lead.”

“Roger. Don’t let her catch you out.”

Tatenashi giggled.

“I *am* Sarashiki Tatenashi.” As she spoke, she unfurled her Rusty Nail chain sword. “I’ll teach her a lesson she won’t forget.”

It was unclear who was the hero and who was the villain as Ichika and the others’ IS sped away, hugging the terrain. And then only Rogna and Tatenashi were left.

A silence fell over the battlefield.

“Wahhh...” Rogna suddenly began to cry. “I’ve been soooooo lonely without you!”

She dove toward Tatenashi for a hug, which Tatenashi nimbly ducked away from.

“Uh, listen. I don’t swing that way.”

“Ahh! So cold!” Tatenashi was five years younger, but she was already completely done with Rogna in a romantic mood. “Love is fierce! Love... Love is an explosion!”

Two nearly-identical IS clashed, wave after wave of exploding nanomachines detonating in midair. Soon they’d attracted the attention of the locals, and unfortunately, footage of the romantically-charged spat between the current and former Russian representatives was on air worldwide.



The terrain flashed by mere tens of meters beneath their feet as Ichika and the others made for Germany. If it were only the IS pilots,

they could easily have made England, but the jet's pilot and Chifuyu couldn't hold out that long. ...Well, on second thought, Chifuyu would probably be fine.

"Ichika! Um, er. You must be getting tired. I can take Chifuyu for a while."

Ichika turned his head to respond to Houki matter-of-factly while still keeping Chifuyu in a princess carry.

"No, let's keep going. I can handle her," he replied. Houki couldn't really argue with this, but that didn't mean she, or anyone else there, was happy about it.

Ichika's enjoying this a little too much.

Maybe he really is into that kind of thing...

Jeez, he's all over her!

And look at her! She has her arms around his neck and everything!

Mein Lehrerin... I never thought... Hahahaha... Ahahahah...

No fair...

Chifuyu was normally supremely self-confident, but the stares were beginning to get to her.

"Um, listen. Ichika. You can leave me behind and continue on to England," she said.

"There's no way I can just leave you!"

His sudden insistence shocked her.

"Fine, if you insist..." She tightened her embrace, looking almost pleased with herself.





At a special forces airfield in Germany, the Schwarzer Hasen lined the runway.

“Laura’s late.”

“She said she’d be here half an hour ago.”

The crowd was beginning to buzz with thinly-veiled consternation. Their uniforms were pitch-black with red piping, and each one wore a patch over their left eye.

Second-in-command Klarissa Harfouch, though, stood stock-still.

“Aren’t you worried, Klarissa?”

She answered the voice from behind her with an angry roar.

“You fool!” It was loud enough to make the front row’s ears ring. That was how forceful her voice was. “How it works in Japan is, ‘The time you wait is part of the date, too.’”

Gasps of awe arose.

“Wow, XO!”

“You know everything!”

“It makes me tingle!”

“She’s perfect in every way.”

Klarissa allowed herself a self-confident chuckle. “Quiet, please.” Her firm sternness only set her squadmates off even more.

“Not a word, then!”

“The quietest of nights for this star to shine in!”

While they were busy not getting the point, seven dots of light made landfall on the IS runway.

“*Angetreten! Augen rechts!*” At Klarissa’s order, the squad formed up for inspection. No less of a formality could be expected to greet their commander Laura and former instructor Chifuyu.

“Ahh, Lehrerin Orimura is going to look so fabulous. I can’t wait to see her gallantly marching forth at the lead of a host of valkyries—”

Enter stage right, Chifuyu being princess carried by Ichika.

“.....” You could practically hear something snap in Klarissa’s head.

“*Rührt euch*, Klarissa.” There was a pang of deep regret in Laura’s voice.

“Commander? What in the world is... that?” As Chifuyu climbed down from Ichika, Klarissa pointed, her voice trembling.

“*That* is Orimura Ichika,” Laura sighed and, Klarissa leaned in to whisper in her ear, “Should we be okay with this?! Siblings or no, that kind of contact with the opposite sex is going to ruin him for marriage!”

“You don’t have to tell *me* that. But she told me quite specifically she ‘wouldn’t let me have him,’ so...”

“And you’re just going to accept that?” Klarissa glared at Ichika, who happened to look up at that moment.

“.....?”

“Ugh... Don’t give me that innocent look! I can’t believe that you’re her brother!” She nervously chewed her fingernails.

“...Klarissa.”

“Yes, Commander?!”

“You’re not me. So stop acting like I used to.”

“.....”

Laura and Klarissa both let out deep sighs.



“Then, let me go over the situation again.” In the Schwarzer Hasen operations room, Chifuyu opened a projection display. “Tatenashi will make her own way to England from Russia. The rest of us will split up, one group crossing by sea from Germany and the other by air from France.”

The assembled squad tilted their heads in confusion.

“If we focus our forces on one front, we’re too likely to get bogged down if hostilities break out again. Also, I’ve requisitioned new equipment from Dunois in France. Therefore... Ms. Yamada will lead Cecilia, Ling, and Houki in the sea crossing.”

More surprise.

“So Laura’s not taking the German route?” Ichika asked doubtfully.

“She’s already equipped with a heavy arms package for this operation. And besides—” Chifuyu looked at Laura and Charlotte. Charlotte’s face had gone pale when the word ‘Dunois’ came up. “I think you should be with her. You’re friends, right?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Laura’s response was loud and clear. Charlotte’s fists were still clenched, but at least she wasn’t trembling anymore.

“The French route will be me, Ichika, Laura and Charlotte, with Kanzashi as support. Once we take delivery from Dunois, we’ll use their corporate jet to travel to England. Any questions?”

As Chifuyu clapped a fist into her palm, Klarissa stepped forward forcefully.

“Lehrerin!”

“Call me ‘Ms. Orimura’! ...Wait, never mind, you’re not from IS Academy. That’s fine.”

“Are you sure this Ms. Yamada is qualified to command the German front? Perhaps I would be more appropriate?”

Ms. Yamada was surprised, but more bemused than angry.

“I suppose your IS Schwarzer Zwieg has been completed?”

“Yes! Final testing was completed a few days ago!”

“Very well. Perhaps we should see just who, between a German special forces IS pilot and an IS Academy instructor, is more qualified.”

The Schwarzer Hasen perked up at the idea of a mock battle.

“Ehh?! A battle already?!”

“And against an old lady, too!”

“Oh, it’s *on*!”

“Looks like she thinks she’s still got it!”

Soldiers or not, they were still teenage girls first. Klarissa silenced them.

“Nena! Falke! Matilda! Io!” The four came to attention as they heard their names. “I’ll see you in the brig later.”

A vein pulsed on Klarissa’s forehead, and the girls’ anger faded to embarrassed blushes.

“Well, you, er, certainly have a very unique squadron here!” Ms. Yamada laughed awkwardly, earning her another glare from Klarissa. One pointed directly at a chest even larger than hers.

“I... I won’t forgive this, you damned *Milchkuh*!” Watching her second-in-command’s glowering jealousy, Laura sighed again.



The German IS special forces squad’s combat arena. Maya and Klarissa, clad in IS suits, stared each other down.

“Let’s do this.” Klarissa held out her hand, and Maya took it.

I’ll show her who has the upper hand here! Klarissa’s hopes of establishing dominance faded, and her face went white as she felt Maya’s grip. *Gah! She’s a goddamn gorilla!*

Maya had realized what was coming and put everything she had into that handshake. Klarissa’s grip was still intense enough to send a cold sweat down her back. The unofficial first round of the match was a draw.

“Aaaaand... Begin!” At Chifuyu’s call, Maya and Klarissa were enveloped in light as their IS opened.

“Here goes!” Yamada Maya’s Rafale Revive Special ‘Show Must Go On’ spread its Shattered Sky shield wings and took to the air.

“I won’t hold back!” Klarissa Harfouch’s IS Schwarzer Zweig opened up around her, and the IS Academy students let out a surprised gasp. Unlike its sister IS, Laura’s Schwarzer Regen, it lived up to its name with a hedgehog-like coat of thorns. An array of wired blades dangled from its branches like fruits on the vine.

“Bring it!” Maya made the first move, entering a Circle Rondo strafe to establish distance.

“Just like a teacher to do everything by the book!”

Maya responded with fire from her American-made .45-caliber

Full Time Bullet assault rifles, notable for their high rate of fire and 200-round magazine.

“Hmph. Take this!” Twenty wired blades arced and twisted toward Maya, writhing like snakes.

“Ugh!” Guns akimbo or not, 20 targets in the blink of an eye was a tall order, and Maya was tripped up. Once the wired blades had sunk their fangs in, just like a snake, they wouldn’t let go. They slammed her into the ground as another wave shot forward. And as they did, Klarissa steadied her .88-caliber Nacht Nacht railgun against her shoulder and drew a bead.

“It’s over!” The Nacht Nacht, an upgraded version of Laura’s railgun, could punch through an IS’ shields and armor in a single shot. But—

“I saw that coming!” Four of Maya’s Wired Tired shields snapped into the path of the shot.



“What?!”

“You picked the right place to focus, but you overcommitted.” Maya pulled out her chainsaw knife and hacked away the wired blades holding her down.

“Not bad!”

“Hahaha. You either!”

A blizzard of fire passed between them as they closed to melee.

Maya wielded the Japanese ‘Kukihime’ macuahuitl, while Klarissa was armed with spiked ‘Sturm und Drang’ baghnakhs. The reach advantage was night and day, but Klarissa had the Schwarzer Zweig’s AIC to fall back on. One tuned entirely for offense, unlike Laura’s.

“Take this! Sturm Zweig!” The thorns which had previously seemed just decoration shot toward Maya. Taken aback, she tried to dodge out, but it was already too late, and her armor was peppered with holes as precise as if they’d been drilled.

“So this is an offensive AIC?!” Once those thorns had pierced her armor, the force fields at their tips were free to tear through what was inside. Like roots twisting through the earth seeking water, they dug in, searching for Maya.

“The Italians don’t have a monopoly on things called storms!” Another coat of thorns sprang up. The Schwarzer Zweig looking more like a blowfish than anything else.

Purging her destroyed shield wings, Maya nimbly dodged back. Just what Klarissa was waiting for.

“.....?!” Maya flinched back as she saw the bed of thorns awaiting her.

“It’s over!” Just as Klarissa thought she’d won, a shot got her in the gut. One from the shield wings Maya had purged. “What?! Those aren’t just shields?!”

Glancing around, Klarissa noticed that she was surrounded.

“I call them Phalanx Twelve!” All that remained was to pull the trigger. For either of them.

“**AHHHHHHHHH!**”

A hundred thorns and a thousand bullets filled the air.



“And that’s a draw... Or a double KO, really.” Maya and Klarissa had each closed their heavily-damaged IS for repair.

“That was a good fight.”

“You’re not half-bad. I apologize.” Each reached out their hand, having bonded over the new respect they’d gained for each other.

“But now we’ve got a new problem. Your IS is too damaged to lead the push.” Chifuyu sighed, cradling her jaw, as Klarissa snapped to attention.

“But don’t worry! We’ll give you an honor guard!” The four girls from earlier surrounded Klarissa. “Nena! Falke! Matilda! Io!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Precise salutes.

“The Schwarzer Hasen EOS squad will escort you to England!” Each had their own EOS with a black rabbit insignia, equipped with weapons that didn’t require an IS core.

I wonder if they’ll be effective fighters. But they were still EOS. *Or even effective cannon fodder...* The EOS squad’s eyes glittered as they contemplated Chifuyu, not realizing her plans for them.

“We can do it!”

“We’ll try our hardest!”

“Can I get your autograph later?”

“I want a selfie with you!”

Chifuyu quieted them with a clap. “Sure, sure. Glad to have you on board.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

And thus, the two groups set off for England.





“I’ll be seeing you in England then. Farewell, Ichika.” Cecilia may have been saying goodbye to Ichika, but after their time at the amusement park, she had no worries.

“Yeah. See you there, Cecilia.”

Two trains set off from a cathedral-esque European station. From the window of the France-bound train, Ichika waved to Cecilia, and she answered with a smile, much to the displeasure of the other girls.

“Ichika, you... You!”

“Ugh, I can’t stand that idiot!”

His two childhood friends, especially, could barely hold their anger back. Or really, just couldn’t.

As the trains rolled away from the station, the scenery outside began to change. Charlotte, sitting across from Ichika, gazed out the window in a melancholic reverie; the vision of a reunion with her father she’d never asked for eating away at her. Ichika had promised her that, as long as she was at IS Academy, she’d be free. But now she’d set foot outside that sanctuary... And she wasn’t the only cadet whose past was catching up to her, either.

“Charl,” Ichika called out to her. “Don’t be so worried. I promised to protect you, and I still mean it.”

As she folded down the seat-back table, more out of habit than anything, she felt Ichika’s hand wrap around hers. As he looked directly into her eyes, she felt her cheeks warm.

“Mmm... Thanks, Ichika,” she replied, wrapping her fingers around his. It seemed like the world was just the two of them for a moment.

“Ahem!” Surprisingly, it was Chifuyu who chose to theatrically clear her throat, as her eyes shifted back and forth. “You know, being on a train really makes my throat dry.”

Laura was the first to follow up.

“Doesn’t it! We should order drinks— No, send someone to get them from the dining car!” She glanced over at Kanzashi.

“Ichika, if you’d be so kind...”

They acted in unison, as if connected by some kind of feminine telepathy.

“Sure, I’m on it,” Ichika said while getting up. “Coffee for you, right, Chifuyu?”

“Yeah. Black, please.” Ichika being Ichika, he checked for Chifuyu’s order and no one else. As he left, Chifuyu turned her gaze to Charlotte. “Don’t push yourself too hard. I know how you try to carry the world on your shoulders sometimes.”

Charlotte was grateful for the sympathy from someone who’d been in the same situation.

“Thank you so much. But this is something I’ve always known I needed to deal with someday,” Charlotte replied, clenching her fists.

“That’s kind of what she meant, Charlotte.” Her friend Laura tried to ease her down.

And then Kanzashi spoke, “None of us are alone in this.”

Buoyed by the kindness, Charlotte nodded.

“Thanks, everyone.”

And then Ichika returned.

“Here’s your coffee, Chifuyu.” His sister was first, of course. The three girls shot him disappointed glances.

“What seems to be the problem?” For some reason, Chifuyu seemed a bit smug.



They’d passed over the border into France. As he took in the sweeping pastoral landscapes of Europe, Ichika turned the conversation to Charlotte.

“So, Charl, where were you born?”

“A small village in Occitània. It’s a bit of a way from here.”

“Don’t you want to visit? You haven’t been home in a while, it’s probably good timing for a side trip.” Ichika meant, but didn’t want to say to her out loud, that it might be a good chance to visit her mother’s grave.

Charl, though, shook her head and said, “Mm, it’s fine. I’m happy just breathing French air again.”

—She didn’t seem to want to. Charl was the type to make do with the small pleasures she’d found. Always had been, as long as he’d known her.

“I see.” Ichika let it go. Knowing when to do so was one of his virtues.

“Oh, by the way,” Ichika spoke up again, seemingly changing the subject. “There’s a station named Charles, isn’t there? Gare de Marseille-Saint-Charles? Reminds me of when we met.”

He hadn’t called her by that name in a while.

“Stop bringing that up!” Charlotte yelled. “It’s embarrassing.”

Laura and Kanzashi had been watching jealously from across the aisle, too fixated on the pair to pay any attention to Chifuyu.

Chifuyu sighed.

“You two,” she called across the aisle. “Move, I want to see out of that side.”

The seating on the train was three-wide, with an aisle separating single seats from double. Chifuyu faced Laura and Kanzashi across a clump of four, while Ichika and Charl were alone facing each other on the other side. Chifuyu had decided to throw a bone to Laura and

Kanzashi by taking a single seat for herself, forcing Ichika and Charlotte back into the group.

“C’mon, move it,” Chifuyu repeated.

Ichika complained at the forced sudden move, “What’s gotten into you, Chifuyu?”

His impertinence was answered with a quick spank on the butt. Something really *had* gotten into her.

“And?”

Ichika sat across from Laura, and crossed his arms.

“Did you say something to Chifuyu?”

“Nothing, nothing at all! You’re such a rude bride.” Laura *hmp*hed, her arms crossed. It was up to Charlotte to smooth things over.

“You don’t have to be so angry, Laura. What would happen if your face got stuck like that?”

“What do you mean, ‘stuck like this’? This is how I normally am.”

“Wouldn’t it be a waste of a cute face like that if it got stuck with a scowl, Kanzashi?”

Kanzashi decided to play along. “Sure would.”

“See? See, Laura? Everyone thinks you’re cute.”

Laura blushed all the way up to her ears. Unable to contain herself, she blurted out, “C-Cute? Cute?! What does that have to do with anything?!”

Ichika moved his feet swiftly to dodge Laura’s embarrassed stomps. He’d been learning to turn the tables on the girls around him.

“You’re different lately, Ichika...” Kanzashi said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. You’re doing intentionally what you used to do unintentionally.”

“Huh, maybe I am,” Ichika replied, almost monotone. The flatness of his voice made the others question his intentions, but none spoke up.

The train rolled on.

“You know, I always thought of France as like something out of the old paintings, but this station is huge,” Ichika spoke up again.

“Japanese stations are small, and they feel even more packed because of all the people.”

“Oh, huh.” As if something had just come to him, Ichika turned to Laura. “German cooking really impressed me. I wish I’d gotten the chance to learn some of those potato recipes.”

The dishes made by the Schwarzer Hasen had been excellent, and it seemed like something she was proud of.

“It’s a soldier’s duty to learn to make good food from whatever’s available. Especially for my squad.” Laura, the leader of an all-female IS squad, must have been nearly as good a cook as Charlotte. Was her

lack of pride in it just because she hadn't awakened to the idea of embracing her own feminine wiles? Or was it because she simply considered it a basic life skill?

"Kanzashi," Ichika said, turning his head toward her. "Is this the first time you've been out of the country? It is for me."

"I haven't really traveled much... so it's been a lot of fun."

"I see. Heard anything from Tatenashi?" Ichika was fishing for a response like 'Yeah, she wrecked that Russkie!'

"Ah, well... I don't think things turned out as well as they could have." Kanzashi was embarrassed by her sister's failure. Still, though, Tatenashi was on her way to England.

"Seems like she's having a bit of trouble too, huh."

"Yeah, a bit..."

Just as their exchange began to blossom into a conversation, a peddler approached them.

"Bonjour. Could I interest you in a sandwich?"

"A sandwich on French bread? I've never had one of those." As Ichika leaned in to examine the goods, the peddler recognized him.

"You... You're Orimura Ichika, from Japan!"

"Er, uh, yeah... But how did you recognize me?"

"Why, you're famous even here! Orimura Ichika, the only man in the world who can pilot an IS! The last ray of hope we men have left!" He thrust out his hand, and Ichika awkwardly shook it. "Ah, *merveilleuse*! Can I have your autograph?"

"Ah, sure. Ahaha..."

Ten minutes of intense questioning later, the man left behind sandwiches for everyone with a final 'it's my treat!' At least he had good intentions.

"I... guess I'm famous?" Ichika said, still stunned by the interaction.

"Of course you are! Didn't you do an interview with that foreign reporter?"

"Well, a bunch of the Schwarzer Hasen wanted my autograph, so I guess it went pretty well," Ichika replied, recalling their meeting not too long ago. "I still don't want to let it go to my head, though."

"Don't worry about it. You've inspired me to work on my own technique."

Ichika blushed at the prodding and said, "Laura! I said I didn't want to let it go to my head."

"Mm? Oh, right," Laura half-apologized, in revenge for her previous torment. She smirked.

"Wow, it's beautiful outside." Kanzashi gazed out the window while biting into her sandwich. "This is good, too. Ichika, you should have some."

“Oh, right. Wouldn’t be right to waste a gift like that.”

It was winter, and being north of pretty much all of Japan just made it even more obvious. As he looked out over the frost-touched landscape, Ichika bit into his sandwich.



After a long journey, it was night. But there was one problem.

“Wait, two triple rooms?”

They’d reserved three doubles, but there must have been some kind of booking error. There were five of them. And one was a boy. Normally they’d just cram in and deal with it, but this was anything but a normal situation for the four girls.

“Hmm. I’m in charge. So the Orimuras will take one, and you three can have the other.” Chifuyu’s argument was less than convincing.

“Wait, wait, wait.”

“That’s not right!”

Well, less than convincing for three girls in love. But Chifuyu wasn’t willing to let it, or them, go.

“You brats will complain about anything, won’t you,” Chifuyu taunted. “Fine, then! Laura! You come with us too. Any complaint about that?”

Divide and conquer.

For Laura, it was the heaven of sharing a room with both Orimuras, but the hell of betraying her friends.

“Ughhhhhh...” Her teeth ground.

From one shoulder, she heard the voice of an angel, “No, Laura! You can’t abandon your friend Charlotte and take it all for yourself!”

“I... I know...”

And from the other, a devil, “Bwahaha. That’s the law of the jungle! Take what belongs to you! Vwee-hee-hee.”

“You’re right, I may never get a chance like this again!”

What do you do, Laura? What do you do?!

“No, you *mustn’t*!” cried the angel.

“You *know* you want to,” sneered the devil.

The world spun around Laura, and she collapsed to the floor with a massive nosebleed.

“Yikes! Laura, are you okay?!” Charlotte yelped, dashing to her where she lay on the ground.

“Charlotte... I... I can’t go on any longer...”

“You’re bloodied, but you’re still in the fight!” Charlotte pulled out a drink and handed it to Laura. ...Blood orange juice.

“A bit on the nose there...” For once, Kanzashi jumped in with the delayed second punchline.

“Why don’t you do rock-paper-scissors instead?” That was an interesting suggestion from Ichika. “The one who loses gets stuck sharing a room with me.”

He definitely wasn’t looking at the situation the same way as the others, but no one else minded. A consolation prize. Those were common enough.

“All right, on the count of three. One, two...” Chifuyu joining in, though, was a bit unexpected. “Three!”

With their hands revealed, Charlotte had ‘lost’ to everyone.

“I did it! I did it, Ichika!” She hopped gleefully from foot to foot, to the consternated glares of Laura and Kanzashi. Chifuyu, meanwhile, sighed in exasperation.

“Good night, everyone!” Charlotte was beaming. With a quick ‘let’s go’ to Ichika, she skipped into the room.

“Oh, wow!”

The room was spacious and well-appointed, mostly the kind of place someone might stay on a business trip. A triple-layer bunk bed wasn’t quite what one would expect to see, but for Charl, so much the better.

“Are you sure you want to share a room?” Ichika asked. “You can always tell Chifuyu to trade.”

“No, I’m fine!” Charlotte snapped. “Wait, would you rather not?”

“It’s fine, just... Ah, just, whatever!”

Not knowing *whatever* that ‘whatever’ was was a nervous thrill to Charlotte.

“Anyway, I’m going to change into my pajamas.”

“All right, I’ll step out then. Tell me when you’re done.” Ichika nearly fled from the room, too quickly to hear Charlotte’s whispered ‘you could have stayed if you wanted...’

She changed quickly, into a striped set, and then called out to him, “Okay, I’m ready.”

“Mm? Oh, okay.” Ichika looked at her curiously. “What happened to the kitty pajamas?”

“Oh, those? There was no way I could bring them with me. Those are kind of for just at home.”

“Ahh, that makes sense.” Charlotte had serious enough things to deal with back home that playfulness must have been the furthest thing from her mind while packing. Even Ichika could realize that. “Okay, let’s get some sleep.”

“Er, ah...” Charlotte slumped a little. She hadn’t expected to go straight to bed.

“So, Charl. Would you rather be on top or underneath?”

Her face lit up bright red. *On top or underneath? I-I can’t decide...*

“If you don’t make up your mind, I’m going to have to make it up

for you.”

“Eh? Ah, um... You decide...”

As she continued to redden, Ichika dove into bed. “I’ll take the bottom bunk, then. You can have either of the other ones.”

While Ichika enjoyed getting first pick, Charlotte was deflating.

“Oh... That’s what you meant...” All she could feel was resentful embarrassment at where her mind had gone. “I guess I’ll take the middle one...”

She climbed up the ladder, and Ichika spoke again, “Hey, Charl.”

“Yeah? What?”



“We’re in France now.”

“Yeah.” Realizing how complicated Charl’s feeling about it must have been, Ichika fell silent. “And?”

“Oh, nothing. Goodnight.” Ichika pulled his blanket up over himself and fell asleep.

Even in the swirl of feelings about everything that was going on, Charl was grateful that he did.

“Mm. Goodnight, Ichika...”

An uneventful night passed.



“So this is Paris. ...It’s cold!” Ichika shivered as he stepped off the train in his IS Academy winter uniform. The weak December sun did little to warm him.

“You’re not dressed for it at all!” Charl reached into her bag and pulled out a scarf before wrapping it around Ichika’s neck.

“Ahh, that’s nice and warm.”

Charl giggled, “*Amb plaisir*, Ichika.”

Charlotte’s smile shone brighter than that dim winter sun—and meanwhile, Laura and Kanzashi, left out the night before, were all icicles. It didn’t help that they were both too nervous being trapped in there with Chifuyu to sleep well.

“Ichika. Bienvenue en France! Bienvenue à Paris!” Charlotte’s coat flowed around her as she gave a polite curtsy.

From behind her, an older man cleared his throat and spoke, “Pardon, *ma Dame*. If we do not leave soon, we will be late.” It was Charlotte’s butler James, a man of perhaps 55 or 60, with an obvious tender respect for her.

“Of course. Let’s go!” Nimbly taking Ichika’s hand, Charlotte led him down the steps of the station to a waiting limousine.

Well, it seems like she’s doing fine so far. Just seeing the smile on her face was a relief to him.

As he relaxed, Charlotte cupped a hand over his and said, “I’m able to relax because you’re here, Ichika.”

“Mm? Really? I don’t really think I did anything...”

“It’s not that.” She giggled. Just him being by her side. That was enough for Charlotte.



Paris, France. A man stood before the gates of the Dunois company’s IS arena. Company president and Charlotte’s father, Albert Dunois. An expensive suit, a beard, and harsh words.

“Any time now.” He stared down at his watch, and the limousine

bearing Charlotte and Ichika arrived. As they slowly got out, his anger reached a peak. "You're *late*."

His first words to Charlotte at their reunion. That alone was enough to set Ichika off, but Charlotte spoke before he could, "My apologies, President. There was traffic."

"Did I ask for an excuse?"

"...Pardon me." Charlotte hung her head, to a derisory 'hmpf' from Albert.

"Where the hell do you get—"

"Orimura!" Ichika was appalled that he'd treat his own daughter like that, but Chifuyu held him back. "I'm sorry that my pupil is so rude."

"I've heard worse."

"Thank you for your forbearance." Chifuyu continued to hold his head down as she spoke. Ichika had had more than enough of this, but she brusquely whispered in his ear, "Don't you realize that it'll only be worse if you do that?!"

"Ugh..." Ichika winced.

"Get yourself together. I didn't bring you here to pick a fight."

"Understood, Chifuyu..."

"Call me Ms. Orimura." She pinched his ear with enough force that he let out a wordless yelp.

"Oww..." Enough force that he could barely speak. Ichika's face flushed red as he fought the pain.

"Anyway, let's get to the point," Albert Dunois began to speak intently. "We'll be moving Charlotte Dunois to a third-generation IS. The preparations are already complete."

As the words echoed, he strode into the arena.

"But wait," Charlotte began to object. "I can't just change... I can't just leave Revive like that!"

Her eyes blazed in refusal, but Albert brooked no argument.

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

"Ugh! You're always like this!" Charlotte shouted, clenching her fists. "You don't understand anything! Not about Revive! Not about my mother!"

"No parent should just force their child to do something they don't want to!" Ichika butted in.

"It's a newly-formatted core. It has none of Charlotte's combat data. It will fail," Laura followed suit.

Slipping by Chifuyu's guard, they stood between Charlotte and her father like human shields.

"...Very well," Albert spoke, irritation clear in his voice. "Shall we gather some of that data with a mock battle? If the Revive wins, perhaps I'll choose to forgive this little indiscretion."

‘Forgive’ was the last word on Laura and Ichika’s minds, but Charlotte stood to accept the challenge, “I accept. We won’t lose. Not me, and not the Revive.”

With a ‘perhaps,’ Albert resumed his stride toward the center of the arena.

“Then see if you can overcome the Dunois third-generation IS ‘Cosmos.’” His words awakened the Cosmos, and its petal-like thruster wings spread.

At the same time, they awakened a faraway memory in Charlotte.

“Maman, what’s your favorite flower?”

“Why, Charlotte?”

“It’s almost your birthday.”

“Well... It’s one I have a lot of memories of.”

“Memories?”

“The flower my love gave to me. The—”

Her mother’s smile, her gentleness, her warmth, all came rushing back. Along with the scent of cosmos...



“Ugh, it’s strong!” As soon as the battle began, Charlotte was on the back foot. The Cosmos had been built as an improvement on the Revive, and outdid it in every way.

Bullets skimmed off its third-generation ‘Le Bouclier de Pétale’ energy shield like drops of rain. Charlotte’s Rafale Revive Custom II was an especially poor match for it. Like a blossoming cosmos, it spread open to reveal weapons suited for both attack and defense. Its ‘Vertu’ .48-caliber hybrid long rifle, the mainstay of its armament, fired both energy projectiles and bullets. Meanwhile, its ten-barreled 28-gauge ‘Tarrasque’ shotgun kept her from getting in close. Charlotte was forced to dodge wildly, hoping for a close-in fight where she could inflict some damage—which seemed to be exactly what the Cosmos’ pilot, Schokolade Chocolat, wanted.

The pilot remained silent. Her face was hidden beneath a full helmet visor, but she was obviously quite skilled.

“If I have to—” Charlotte fired off an ignition boost, taking the full brunt of the Cosmos’ attacks before firing another.

“That’s too dangerous, Charl!” She could hear Ichika’s voice from far away, but she knew she had to risk it all.

Feinting with her Grey Scale pile bunker, she backflipped into the air with a rising kick. Chocolat flinched at the unexpected attack, giving Charlotte the opening to hit her with a shotgun blast.

And as her visor cracked...

“Tch!”

“Wait, you’re—” Charlotte gasped. The face below wasn’t

Schokolade Chocolat at all, but the Phantom Task member Autumn.

“Dammit! I had to cut my hair for this disguise!” she yelled.

“What?! What’s going on?!” As Charlotte shouted, Albert’s face twisted into an uncharacteristic panic.

“I’m taking this new IS, that’s what’s going on, you stupid kid,” Autumn jeered.

“Monsieur Dunois! Lock the arena shields!”

“I’m trying! I’m trying, but it’s being hacked!”

The image of Chloe Chronicle’s face flitted through Chifuyu’s mind. Immediately she called out, “This was a trap! Kanzashi, try to counter-hack it!”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Kanzashi opened the Uchigane Nishiki’s consoles, and her fingers raced over the keyboards as a wall of information filled the screens.

“Chifuyu!” As she wavered, Ichika leapt forth. “I can neutralize the arena’s shields! And then we can help Charl!”

“You idiot! That’s exactly what they want! As soon as the shields go down, she’ll escape!”

“We can’t just watch this happen to her! CHARLOTTE!” Laura yelled. She could barely stand to watch, either.

“I’m a failure as a father...” Albert mumbled, his powerlessness weighing on his mind. “I put my daughter in danger again...”

“Again?! What do you mean, again?” Ichika turned in confusion.

“There was an attempt before, within the Dunois group, to remove Charlotte,” he replied. “By the simplest means, assassination.”

“Assassi—”

“But there’s no one in the world kept as safe as IS pilots are,” Albert continued. “That’s why I gave Charlotte the Revive.”

“That makes no—”

“At IS Academy, she was beyond the reach of our family.”

As he thought of that being the reason Albert pushed her away, the blood rushed to Ichika’s head.

“I’ve heard enough!” he yelled. It didn’t matter. Anyone who would hurt Charlotte like that was Ichika’s enemy.

Albert swayed on his feet from the sudden punch before swinging back at Ichika.

“You stupid brat!” Albert yelled back. “What do you even understand?!”

“I don’t know what your reasons are! I don’t care what your reasons are!”

Chifuyu just let them fight. At this point, it changed nothing.

“Ms. Orimura! I’ve found the source of the hacking!”

“Good work, Kanzashi!” Chifuyu readied herself to go after Chloe, then grimaced when she saw her position. “A kilometer overhead...”

Eesh.”

Chloe’s IS Kurokagi may have been specialized for cyber-warfare, but it still retained the basic function of flight. Chifuyu had forgotten that in her focus on it being a set of grafted cybernetic enhancements. As she frowned, the ceiling of the arena began to spread open. Autumn was about to escape. *She’s going to get away! But this is our chance to go on the attack!*

Before she could, though, Autumn moved to finish off the panicking Charlotte.

“And now it’s time for payback.” A point-blank barrage of shotgun blasts shattered the Revive’s armor.

“Guh!” Charlotte recoiled.

Leveling her rifle at the exposed IS core, Autumn fired a finishing shot. All the others could do was watch as the Revive’s core began to crack apart.

“Oh no!” Laura snapped her IS Schwarzer Regen open. “How long are you two going to keep that up?!”

Yanking Ichika out of his fight, she slapped him across the face. This was the second time she’d hit him.

“Let’s go, Ichika!” she yelled.

“Got it!”

Only Charlotte’s voice stopped his swing of Reiraku Byakuya.

“No! Stay back!” Breaking their way in was exactly what their enemy wanted. “Please! Give me your strength, Revive! Not for me! For her! For my mother!”

She wouldn’t let her mother’s beloved cosmos be disgraced like this. Her will burned like a flame, and in response, the Revive’s core gleamed.

“A second shift? Now?! Stop, Charlotte! It can’t take it!” Chifuyu yelled. Ignoring her warning, Charlotte focused all her energy.

“I won’t let that happen!” Autumn dove in again on the attack, not wanting to leave Charlotte a single opening. Yet as she did, the Revive began to resonate with the Cosmos’ armor, and the two IS were bathed in light. Charlotte and Autumn were both thrown from their IS to the ground.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I like it! I’ll take them both!”

“I won’t let you have them!” Charlotte shouted out. “Come, Revive! Rein Carnation!”

Her voice, her hopes—were heard. The two IS transformed into a swirl of light, then a halo, wrapping around her. Wrapping around her like a mother’s love. Like a father’s pride.

“Life will be hard for her.”

“I know. But we must love her anyway. Love her as much as you loved me.”

“...I understand.”

The voices of Charlotte’s mother and father resonated in her head.

“It’s so warm... So this is my mother’s and... and my father’s hopes...”

That was the first moment in her life she’d accepted Albert as her father. As the light washed over her, the world’s first dual-core IS—the Rein Carnation—was born.

The wings and armor of an angel. A form, and an armament, in the shape of a cosmos flower. And the combat data of the Revive. An IS all Charlotte’s own.

“Tch!” Realizing her defeat, Autumn opened her IS Arachne and turned to flee. But Charlotte, the Angel of War, was not so forgiving.

“I’m not letting you escape! Not after disgracing the name of the cosmos!” Rein Carnation took flight, like the divine messenger of an angry god. The reborn .48-caliber Vertu II hybrid double rifle glowed with an unearthly light as it sprayed fire.

“Laura! Ichika! You handle the one up there!”

“Got it!” At Chifuyu’s order, they burst through the arena roof.

In the blue heavens above, Chloe, wearing a black gothic lolita outfit, awaited. A fateful encounter for Laura.

“So there you are...” muttered Chloe.

“You... Your face!” The same face. The same hair. The same skin. It was as if Laura was looking in a mirror.



“Why, if it isn’t the perfected Lorelei. I am you. Another Laura who couldn’t become you.” Her words flowed like a song, echoing uncannily in Laura’s ears.

“Lorelei?! What are you talking about?!”

“It’s better for you not to know. And you, the man beside her. Orimura Ichika.”

“Me? What about me?!” Ichika gasped, unable to contain his surprise at being singled out by name.

Again, words sprung liltily from her lips “A complete maverick. Someone who must be... Removed... For my mistress’s sake.”

“What?!”

An incoming transmission snapped Laura and Ichika out of their confusion. “What are you two doing?! You’re looking at a projection!”

“.....?!” Chloe disappeared, and darkness fell over the sky. A sea of inky blackness replaced the blue yonder, the pale moon rose in place of the yellow sun. The whirl of clouds around them transformed into a maelstrom.

“This... This is a World Purge!” Laura cowered as the world faded around her, but Ichika was there to drag her back to reality.

“Let’s get out of here, Laura!”

“Have you gone crazy?!”

“Get a hold of yourself! If we stay up here, you’ll be sucked in again!”

“...Understood.” Calmed by Ichika, Laura followed him back down to the arena. *Lorelei? What was that supposed to mean? Just who am I?* Still shaken by the World Purge, her heart sank as fast as her altitude while she thought quietly. Of her birth. Of her past. Her heart ached as she looked back.

Chloe Chronicle... What are you... She hadn’t understood. Not a single thing. But now, everything was falling into place. That’s right. I’m—

One of the ‘Boosted.’ An enhanced humanoid. Engineered for strength. A marionette made for battle.

“—Ra! Hey! Laura!”

“Wh-What?!”

“Good, you’re awake. Are you okay? You’re pale as a sheet.” Ichika looked at her concernedly, and her knees turned weak.

That’s right. I’m... It didn’t matter who she *was*. What mattered was who she is now. Now that she had something to fight for.

“Oh, nothing. And anyway! You’re too close! Back off!”

“You don’t have to hit me! I’ll move! I’ll move!” If nothing else, she’d livened up a bit by the time they’d touched down.

There, the battle was over. Charlotte had her rifle leveled at Autumn’s forehead. “You’re not getting away this time.”

“This shit again... Son of a *bitch*.”

And thus, the action at the arena drew to a close.



“Oww... I can’t believe that brat actually punched me.” In the medical office at the arena, Charlotte’s father Albert was being patched up after his fistfight with Ichika.

“It’s your punishment. For being a man who dared to love two women.” The nurse applying ointment to his face was his wife, Rosenda Dunois. Rosenda, a woman who looked every inch the wife of a baron of industry, smiled teasingly.

“Hmph...”

Ichika was receiving treatment in another room. And Chifuyu was interrogating Autumn.

“It’s been years since I’ve seen you this worked up,” said Rosenda, peering into his eyes.

“It’s all because that brat doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut!”

“Of course.” Albert fell silent, his rage politely ignored. “...You must have known, then. That I could never have a child.”

“.....”

“That’s why you took another woman. Because there was no other way you could still love me.”

“Perhaps.” Rosenda cut through the tense mood with a chuckle. “You should be more honest with me.”

She playfully dug a finger into his scrape.

“Oww! Don’t!”

“The girl needs to be loved. I’m sure I’ll come around to her, too.”

“Yeah...” Albert fell silent, at a loss for words.

“More importantly, what about the IS? I believe we’ve lost one?”

“How will I be able to explain it... There’s no knowing what the government will have to say. I’m sure they’ll want someone to blame.”

“Oh my.”

“But it’s a father’s duty to take responsibility.” Albert puffed out his chest pugnaciously.

“Indeed it is.” Rosenda smiled, showing a woman’s forbearance.

“But telling them we’ve developed the world’s first dual-core IS will keep them at bay,” Albert continued, as if already rehearsing his excuse. “That will likely keep them quiet.”

“Well, then, the company’s problems are solved. But how shall we handle the girl?”

“...Hmm.” Albert fell silent, which was as good as an answer. “...I still don’t approve of her taste in men.”

Rosenda chuckled. “Ahh, young love.”

“Hmph!”

The only witness to their conversation was the setting sun outside the window.



“Oww... I can’t believe that old bastard actually punched me.” In another room, Charlotte was caring for Ichika.

“Well, you punched him first, right?” Charlotte stifled a giggle as she wrapped gauze around his face.

“What kind of grownup acts like that?!”

“It’s because you pushed him so far. Now hold still... There we go.” As Charlotte repacked the first aid kit, she gazed at Ichika.

Noticing, he tilted his head quizzically. “Is something wrong?”

“Mmm... I just wanted to thank you.” A blush began to rise to Charlotte’s cheeks.

“I don’t think there’s anything to thank me for...”

“Yes there is!” Ichika was surprised by her sudden shout.

Charlotte, for her part, gasped before looking down at the floor awkwardly. “I think there is. You’ve always been there for me.”

“Really?”

The two fell silent, but not awkwardly. Instead, they let the sudden feeling of peace walk over them.

“Staaaaaaare.”

They could feel stares drilling into them from the cracked door.

“Staaaaaaare.”

Stares belonging to Laura and Kanzashi.

“You two can come in, you know.” As Charlotte spoke, their expressions immediately brightened.

“Very well, then.”

“Pardon us...”

The two stared intently at Ichika as they walked in.

“Wh-What?” he asked.

“I was just thinking, picking a fight with a grownup twice your size is probably the stupidest thing I’ve seen you do. And that’s saying a lot.”

“Ichika... You really need to learn some self-control.”

“Ugh.” There was no way to argue with that. “But! But, I—”

Ichika leaned forward, unable to just sit and take their criticism. Charlotte laid a finger across his lips to stop him from continuing on, then said, “I know, I know. We’ll call it a draw, okay?”

“Ugh...”

The three girls laughed at his sputtering consternation. The only witness to their conversation was the setting sun outside the window.



“Err, thank you for your hospitality.” The butler had escorted Ichika and the others to the airport in Paris.

“Take care, *ma Dame*.”

“Jeez. I’m not a princess or anything. You can just call me by my name,” protested Charlotte.

“Impossible! It would be a betrayal of my master, and unspeakable rudeness to the heir to the Dunois fortune. I simply can’t bring myself to do so.”

“Ahaha...”

As Charlotte laughed wanly, Ichika whispered in her ear, “This must be a lot of weight on your shoulders, Charl.”

“Yeah.” Charlotte blushed at his sudden closeness. As she did, the butler James picked up on the subtle cue.

“And you, Monsieur Orimura. She may be your friend, but you’re close for friends. Rather *too* close. I must ask you to step back.” With a surprising strength for his age, the butler pushed them apart. A withering glare and a stomp to the foot completed this picture of French propriety.

Putting some distance between himself and the butler, Ichika whispered in Laura’s ear this time, “I, uh. I don’t think he likes me very much.”

“I guess.” Just as Charlotte’s had, Laura’s cheeks reddened as he leaned close.

“*Sacré bleu!* This simply will not do! This, this... This unbecoming behavior! If you have chosen *ma Dame*, you must stand by your decision! If you have not, I simply cannot allow you to accompany her any further!”

“Come on! It’s not that big of a deal! We’re going to miss our flight!” Pressing by the enraged butler, Charlotte rushed to the boarding gate.

“We’ve gotta get going. See you.” As Ichika tried to duck by the butler, he was caught by the collar.

“I hope you understand. If you make her cry, I may forgive you someday, but *Monsieur*...”

At the realization that it was all just a father’s concern for his daughter, Ichika burst out laughing without realizing it.

“I’ll make sure I don’t! Goodbye!”

Au revoir, France! Next stop, England!

Chapter III: Excalibur, Golden Blade of Glory

“It’s cold!” Ichika wrapped his arms around himself as he stepped out of the airport.

“Again? You should realize, the further north you go, the colder it’ll get.” Charlotte took off her own cap and smiled in satisfaction as she placed it on Ichika’s head.

Seeing her expression, Ichika couldn’t help but laugh himself. Leaving the airport, they were greeted beside the roundabout by the squad who had come from Germany.

“I-Ichika?! Aren’t you rather close to Charlotte?” Their happy, contented air was anything but calming to Cecilia. She couldn’t help but imagine what had happened in France that had brought them closer together. “D-Did something happen in France?”

“We just—”

As Ichika began to explain, a mad dog who’d slipped her collar began to howl. “You little shits! Let me the hell go! Gahhh— You’re gonna break my fucking neck, shit-for-brains!”

The source of the commotion was Autumn. Chifuyu, already well-practiced at this, had put her in an arm lock. “...Well, a lot happened,” Charlotte sighed.

Noticing the bandages on Ichika’s face, Cecilia was alarmed. “Ichika, are you all right?! Charlotte! What happened to him?!”

Ichika calmed her with a quick headpat and said, “I’m fine.”

“Ah... Yes...” Cecilia blushed and stared down, a child’s embarrassed blush.

Houki and Ling were less than pleased. The reunion wasn’t a cause for joy. Just a return to how things should have been to begin with, in their minds.

“Anyway! I saw your IS on TV, Charlotte! That was amazing!” Ling shoved a French newspaper at them.

“What’s it say? ‘The second coming of La Pucelle de France?! Charlotte Dunois and the world’s first dual-core IS, Rein Carnation’... It’s already in the papers?!” Albert must have been pulling strings. Once he set his mind on something, there was no stopping him.

“That guy...”

He may have gotten over his anger, and he may have just thrown up his hands in frustration and moved on. Taken charitably, it may have been an attempt to protect Charlotte. But from anyone else’s

viewpoint, it was the actions of an embarrassingly proud dad. On the front page was a photo of Charlotte's face, she hadn't even realized there was a photographer there.

"Ah, wait... Aaaaaahhhhhhhh!" Flustered, Charlotte grabbed the newspaper from Ichika and tore it up. "Y-You didn't even see this! Right, Ichika?"

"Uh, sure."

Charlotte blushing curled up into herself, embarrassed at her family.

"Ahem! In any case, welcome, Ichika! Welcome, everyone! Welcome to Great Britain!" Cecilia gave a prim curtsy, the very picture of a proper lady. Behind her, her maids lined up. Twenty-four of them, flanking her on either side. She looked like Moses parting the seas.

But what was unusual was that the Alcotts' chief maid Chelsea was not present. Ichika couldn't help but notice the dark undertone to Cecilia's smile.

"Hey, Cecilia—"

"CHICHAN!" Rushing up trailing a cloud of dust came none other but the inventor of the IS (and current Interpol Red Notice subject) Shinonono Tabane. "I've missed you sooooo much! Oh! And Houki's here too! And even Icky! The All-Stars are all here, ehehe."

Tabane wiped a vein of drool from her face as Chifuyu held her off with a single hand. They were always like this. But Ichika couldn't help but have his doubts. She was a Phantom Task higher-up, trouble on two feet—a lit stick of dynamite.

"Chifuyu, what on earth..."

"Let me explain." Chifuyu rasped out a sigh, and began to speak sternly. "The upcoming mission is a joint operation between European Union high command, IS Academy officials... And Phantom Task."

"Wh—?!"

Chifuyu stepped forward as their jaws dropped. "Quiet down! We move out at sixteen hundred hours, four hours from now. The operation is called..."

[Sword Breaker!]



Elsewhere, at a Royal Air Force base. Dozens of technical staff were milling around.

"I don't understand what's going on..." Ichika cradled his head in his arms as his fellow pilots put their IS through their checklists. His own Byakushiki had been changed to 'Unlimited' combat mode, equipped with reactive armor, a shield, and a top-secret package, all being attended to by the mechanics passing by him. "What are they

even doing? All my expansion slots are already full. I hope that black box package even does something...”

An engineer, overhearing his murmuring, slapped him on the butt. “Whoa!”

“Hey there, cutie. Long time no see.” A school swimsuit-style IS suit on her body, a lab coat, swim goggles on her head, and a harpoon in her hand. It was half a world away from where they’d met, but Ichika still recognized her instantly.

“Kagaribi Hikaruno?!”

“*Haaaaaaaai!* The lady of your dreams, Kagaribi Hikaruno! Back by popular demand!” She snapped her swim goggles off. He could see she was still dripping wet. She’d probably just been diving again, but there was no way to really tell. “I’ve got something super-special for you today! An attachment to finally let Byakushiki take expansions! Of course, Professor Shinonono took the lead in development—”

As if summoned, Tabane popped her head up. “Icky, you should take a walk somewhere while I take a look at Byakushiki.”

“Really? That’s kind of out of nowhere.”

“You’re in England! Take in the sights! There’s no reason you have to be cooped up in here just because everyone else is.”

Ignoring Hikaruno, Tabane looked straight at Cecilia; who, remembering their previous encounter, gulped.

“Hey, Cecilia! Why don’t you take Icky somewhere?”

“**Huh?**” Ichika, Cecilia, and even Chifuyu gasped in surprise.

Tabane had always been one to straight-up ignore the people around her. As they wondered just what had made her change, Tabane pushed Ichika forward.

“Go for it!” she said. Nervously, Ichika approached Cecilia. “C’mon, you’d better get going!”

Tabane pushed Cecilia toward Ichika before returning to her work. That, at least, was the Tabane they all knew.

“Er, um...”

“Shall we?”

Two others crept up on them as they nervously wavered. Ling and Houki.

“Hold it, Ceci—hrmph!”

“Hey, Ichi—hlmph!”

As if driven by a sixth sense, Chifuyu caught them and clamped a hand over each of their mouths.

“Don’t you two have some checklists to run down? This mission’s going to take everything your IS have.” Her eyes gleamed. There was no arguing with that.

“Understood...”

Tabane flashed Chifuyu a thumbs-up. All she could respond with

was a sigh.





Cecilia practically skipped down a brick-paved avenue as she dragged a nervous Ichika by his hand. *This is finally my chance! It's like they say in Japan, 'mochi fallen from a shelf'!* Cecilia tried not to clench her fists in excitement. *I need to take it slowly, coolly, but boldly! Just like Sherlock Holmes would!*

Focusing on the 'boldly' part, she realized something. *Oh no! My lingerie today... I didn't wear anything special...* Forgetting a girl's final weapon, her date night panties, was a fatal mistake. But this was all so unexpected. Cecilia tried to convince herself that it wasn't her own fault. *What was the line in that show? Ah, yes! 'Fortune is a fickle ally'!* Thinking back to an anime Kanzashi had sat her down and made her watch, she tried to pump herself up. *Anyway! I do still need to show Ichika London.* She let go of his hand, before wrapping her arm around him.

"Uhh, Cecilia..."

"You're cold, aren't you? This should warm you up a bit."

"I guess, but..." For once, Ichika decided to shut up rather than draw attention.

"Shall we be off, then? I have so much to show you!"

Ichika knew well that there was no way he could stop Cecilia once she got started. *I guess it's a good way to keep her mind off Chelsea.* He had his own way of caring. And no matter how embarrassing it was for him, he wasn't going to slip out of her embrace.

"Cecilia, I know it's not all that fun, but do you know where I could get a coat? It really is cold here."

"I know just the place! I'm sure you'll find something perfect for you." She smiled, pleased with herself.

Ichika walked along beside her, entranced by its gleam. "If it's something you recommend, won't it be expensive, though?"

"Don't worry. I'll cover it."

"You don't have to—"

"Why, it's nothing to worry about. I'm an Alcott. I have a *castle*, for goodness' sake." Meaning she was nobility. They really did live in different worlds.

"Thanks, then."

"If it bothers you that much, you're welcome to pay me back, of course."

"Eesh. Uhh, maybe I don't need a coat."

"Ahaha, I was only kidding." Cecilia, feeling even better, held Ichika tighter. His pulse began to rise as he felt her chest rub against him.

“And here we are.”

Ten minutes later, they'd arrived at a shop right in the middle of a block on the high street. Ichika marveled at its very English fusion of classical design and high style. As he gawked at his surroundings, an English gentleman poked his head out to receive them.

“Why, if it isn't Miss Alcott. And such a marvelous young man. It's an honor to be graced by your presence.”

“Why, thank you,” said Cecilia with a nod. “Go ahead, Ichika.”

“Huh? Ah. Okay.” He pushed the heavy door open and stepped into a warm room heavy with tradition. As he slid his borrowed coat off, a gentleman, dressed in black, stepped up to take it.

“Your coat, if I may,” said the man.

“Th-Thanks.” He awkwardly handed it over, and the man stepped back. Not being asked for his name or given a claim check was definitely a departure from how things worked in Japan. “H-Hey, Cecilia. I'm a bit out of place here.”

“Why, not at all! Look at that coat there, I think it would be wonderful on you.”

The lack of a price tag made Ichika nervous as the attendant helpfully raised it so he could thread his arms through. It was a trenchcoat, in all black. It made him look more mature.

Cecilia gasped in relish as he tried it on.

“Oh my! Ichika, it looks wonderful on you!”

“Really?” He wasn't much one to argue with praise.

“We'll take this one. He'll be wearing it, so no need to wrap it. Bill it to my account.” Cecilia quickly handled the formalities and, arm-in-arm, they stepped out of the shop. “It's the British way to decide these sorts of things on first impression.”

Ichika wasn't sure if she was joking with him or not, but she followed up with a wink.

“Well, if you say so.”

“Would I lie?”

Next up was a stroll around London. The well-made coat was warmer than it looked, and protected Ichika from the winter chill. And also made Cecilia's warmth and curves feel a little bit further away.

“Let me show you a café next, Ichika. They have my favorite tea.” A playful smile drifted to her face, before suddenly being wiped off. “Chelsea...?”

Cecilia spied her across the road, in the corner of her vision. Chelsea wasn't wearing her usual maid outfit. Instead, she had on Phantom Task's trademark black cloak.

“Catch me if you can,” she intoned quietly. The words were lost in the drone of a passing car's exhaust, but the meaning came through

loud and clear.

“Ichika!”

“I know!”

They had no IS. But they had to give chase. Neither was experienced enough to pass over the obvious bait.



“Then, let’s go over the special O.V.E.R.S. packages that your IS have been equipped with.” Every checklist had been checked, every feature tuned, and now Chifuyu had summoned Houki, Ling, and Laura for a briefing.

“What about Ichika and Cecilia?” asked Houki, nervously raising her hand. The three there were already in their IS suits.

“Those two will be taking a different role in the mission. Cecilia’s IS is more suited for a different package, and doesn’t require this explanation... I’ll be explaining to Orimura directly.”

“Okay then!” called out Kagaribi Hikaruno, striking a strange pose as she made her entrance. “Let me explain my very own Output Variable Energy Reverse System package!”

Chifuyu ignored Hikaruno’s thumbs-up. It was hard to imagine them as classmates. But, then and now, Chifuyu had always paid much more attention to Tabane.

“Umm, let’s see...” continued Hikaruno. “The O.V.E.R.S. is able to amplify and shift a small source of energy to provide a massive energy output—”

As if waiting for these words, Tabane swooped in and said, “That’s just like Akatsubaki’s Kenran Butou! What a coincidence! It’s almost like—”

“Almost like I copied from the Akatsubaki.” Hikaruno defanged Tabane’s sudden glare with a flat admission. “Ugh...”

There was no reason for the three IS Academy students to know this, but it was the first step in the focus of Kagaribi Hikaruno’s current project: the Mass-Produced Akatsubaki Plan. But she’d been seen through. Not like it was difficult.

“You’re twelve thousand years too early to sneak something like that by me,” Tabane chuckled smugly.

“...If I may proceed?”

“Ohh, of course, Chichan!” Tabane saw an opportunity to sneak a hug and dove in, only to be silenced by Chifuyu’s fist.

“The mission will require the O.V.E.R.S.-equipped IS to link. In order to synchronize output levels, the Akatsubaki will be equipped with one as well,” Chifuyu went on. “Ms. Yamada and Kanzashi will provide backup. Dunois’s IS is still unstable, so for this mission she will be held in reserve on Earth along with Tatenashi.”

‘On Earth’ silenced the pilots.

“The theater of operation will be...” Chifuyu pointed a finger straight up. “Space.”



“**Haah... Haaah...**” Ichika and Cecilia chased Chelsea through the crowded streets for nearly 20 minutes and were out of breath.

“Wow, she’s fast.”

“We’ve almost got her. This is a—”

It was a dead end. Something which Chelsea knew as well.

“Now we’ve got you.”

Chelsea turned around slowly, a rapier in each hand.

“I knew you’d catch me eventually, Cecilia Alcott. Now, shall we settle this?”

She tossed one of the rapiers to Cecilia, who nimbly snatched it from the air into a duelist’s stance.

“If I prevail, you’ll tell me everything.”

“Very well! And if I win... Ichika is mine!” Chelsea’s self-satisfied chuckle at the idea set Cecilia’s teeth on edge.

“Are you making fun of me?!”

“Of course not. Quite the opposite, in fact. Are you just afraid you can’t win?”

Cecilia, her gorge rising, sprung to the attack, but her enraged flailing was simply batted away as Chelsea brought the point of her blade to her neck.

“Point. Shall we go to best of seven?”

“Ugh...!”

Ichika, not sure what to do, tried to calm Cecilia, “Cecilia! You need to cool down!”

“I know, but...!” She took a deep breath, and her eyes shone the calm blue of the ocean. “En garde!”

“Come!”

A quick thrust turning to a cut. Chelsea stepped back to evade, but Cecilia deftly followed and, with a quick side-stroke, cleanly sliced open Chelsea’s blouse.

“And now we’re even.”

“I appreciate the challenge.” Rebuttoning her jacket over the tear, Chelsea raised her sword again. Cecilia, likewise, came to the ready a pace away. “Shall I lead this time?”

With a sudden deep breath, Chelsea darted forward, inside Cecilia’s reach, before bringing her blade up sharply, cutting a slit up the side of Cecilia’s skirt as if delivering a riposte to the assault on her own dignity. Cecilia’s thigh, pale in the chill wind, thrust through the tear.

“Two.”

“This isn’t finished yet!” With the slit, though, came newfound mobility, and Cecilia moved like a flash, lopping off a lock of Chelsea’s hair. “And my second as well. Perhaps you should focus?”

“I appreciate your concern.” Chelsea’s eyes narrowed, as if she was finally taking the fight seriously. At the same time, Cecilia took her own advice, and soon they were caught in a flurry of thrusts and ripostes. An intricate waltz of steel on steel. All Ichika could do was nervously gulp as he watched them alternately dance like butterflies and sting like bees.

Blades flashed as they missed by the narrowest of margins, cutting away at the combatants’ clothes yet failing to draw blood. It was as if, to continue the butterfly metaphor, they were both undergoing metamorphosis, cutting each other out of their cocoons. But eventually, someone had to slip. And it was Cecilia.

“Three. Checkmate.”

“Ugh...”

The flaw was in her shoes. While Chelsea was wearing sturdy, functional boots, Cecilia had on a pair of high heels, and was unstable enough on her feet that she couldn’t land a firm blow.

“Enough of this!” Cecilia, at the end of her rope, slid off her heels and kicked them to the side. “Ichika.”

“Eh?”

“Tell *absolutely no one* what happened here.” Her voice was deadly serious. He had only a moment to wonder what she meant before she kicked off the tattered remnants of her skirt and stood, stripped down to her lingerie.



“Such determination. As I expected of you.”

“Enough formality. Let’s finish this!” Cecilia sprung forth as forcefully as she yelled, striking gracefully, beautifully, but more than anything forcefully. With a loud clang, their swords met—and Chelsea’s was cut through. “Third!”

Even though Chelsea was disarmed, Cecilia pressed the attack. She knew what was next. She couldn’t *not* know. Chelsea was like a sister to her—as far back as she could remember, they’d learned together, trained together. And in this situation, there would be only one response.

“.....!”

Chelsea grabbed her own broken blade from midair and, ignoring the blood welling up from her hand as she gripped it, thrust toward Cecilia’s eyes. And those eyes, burning blue, turned toward it. Firmly. Fearlessly. Unflinchingly. As if there were only two things in the world. The blade. And Chelsea beyond it.

“.....”

The duel was over. Chelsea’s blade stopped, a hair’s breadth from Cecilia’s eyes. Cecilia’s, a hair’s breadth from Chelsea’s jugular.

“A draw, then.” Cecilia cast away her weapon. Realizing that the battle was over, Ichika hurried to wrap his coat around Cecilia.

“Thank you, Ichika.”

“I, uh, I mean I kind of had to,” Ichika spoke nervously, knowing he’d seen something he wasn’t meant to. Cecilia looked at him bemusedly. And Chelsea, watching the glow between them, closed her eyes.

“Welcome back, Mistress.”

Cecilia nodded in satisfaction.

“I’m home, Chelsea.”

The duel between master and servant had concluded.



A helicopter from the RAF’s IS special forces squadron carried them to their destination in the Highlands.

“Let’s go over the operation again.” Chifuyu’s voice came over the radio. “Orimura. Shinonono. Huang. Bodewig. You’re to ascend to orbit using the graviton catapult and make contact with Excalibur. I’ll be blunt. You’re decoys. Your job is to draw the attention of the defenders while Alcott makes a long-range sniping attack from the surface using a BT particle accelerator. The success of the operation rests in her hands.”

Ichika waved to Cecilia across the aisle to reassure her and said, “Don’t worry. We’re all in this together. It’ll be fine.”

“Ichika...”

A projection display opened between them, as if to interrupt.

"This is your target." A sword, floating in space. Its 15-meter length focused sunlight before unleashing it on the Earth. More images showed its blade splitting, and a field forming between its prongs like a lens.

"This is..."

'Like an IS' sprang to mind.

Chifuyu, noticing the realization, turned to Chelsea.

"Chelsea Blankett. Fill them in."

"If I may. Officially, the Excalibur is a top-secret bombardment satellite built by the US and England. In reality, it's an IS fused with a human being." The cadets weren't sure how far they should trust her. "You might ask how I know this. The answer is, my little sister Exia Caliburn is its pilot... No, its *core*," Chelsea intoned solemnly.

Cecilia was shocked. "Chelsea, you have a little sister?! You never —"

"*Had*. She'd been completely erased from government records. And I searched for her, for so, so long..."

The cadets gasped in shock. It was impossible to even imagine what Chelsea must have felt when she found out.

"Wait. Excalibur was under Phantom Task control when it attacked Japan. So why are you helping destroy it?" There was that one unanswered question, and Cecilia was sharp enough to bring it up.

"It's gone out of control. Maybe she awakened. Maybe there was another reason. I don't know. But now, Excalibur has left its orbit and is moving toward England. Its target is Buckingham Palace. There's no time to lose."

The royal family had already been evacuated, but the destruction of a national symbol would be sure to have a major societal impact. Therefore, it fell upon IS Academy to secretly recapture or destroy Excalibur. IS Academy, with the latest IS and no geopolitical entanglements. Not to mention, an insistence by Tabane that her own participation was tied to that of its cadets.

"I may have stolen the third Blue Tears unit and joined Phantom Task, but my country—and my sister—were always my highest priority." Chelsea fell silent and closed her eyes. No one could possibly understand the depth of her self-loathing—except Cecilia.

"Chelsea, when this is all over..." She understood that the cryptic challenges had been to help her grow. She knew that Chelsea's loyalty had been unwavering.

"I accept whatever punishment is chosen for me."

"No... When this is over, Chelsea, I expect us to have tea. Understood?"

“Mistress... It would be an honor.”

Madoka, pilot of the stolen Silent Zephyrus and its upgraded form Kurokishi, watched with obvious boredom. Even more displeasing to her was being kept in a separate helicopter from Chifuyu.

“Tch. A fricking tea party? Are you serious?” Her voice practically dripped with venom. She opened her locket for a moment and stared inside before tucking it back under her blouse and glaring at Ichika. “We’ll settle this once and for all.”

Ichika, feeling her glare, replied softly, “Yes. We will.”

There would be no one there to stop them. No matter what Chifuyu thought. The hand of fate weighed upon them as they silently passed time until arrival.

“This is...” A forested mountain, far away from civilization. The only sign of human life, a gigantic structure which looked like an observatory.

“This is our BT particle accelerator. The air defense cannon ‘Afternoon Blue.’” Chifuyu alighted from another helicopter and met up with the group. She looked like she had something to say, but then changed her mind. After all, Madoka was there. No matter what was going through her mind, she had to stay composed. “All right! Take up your positions! Blue Tears units, sync with Afternoon Blue. Orbital detachment, get busy with final adjustments to your O.V.E.R.S. packages!”

The time to rise to the heavens had come. Strangely enough, to do battle with another IS.

“Outer space... Really, what’s going on with IS Academy?” It was an obvious question, and one which slowed Ichika as he started in on tuning. *I have a bad feeling about this... I hope it’s just nerves.* It was something he’d felt before, though. Not just fear... Premonition. Silently, he buried his head in preparations, trying to shake the feeling that was haunting him.



“Commence operations!”

Three gravitational anchors sunk in the earth marked their spots. Within those technological ley lines, Ichika, Houki, Ling, and Laura waited in four graviton catapults, their IS deployed.

“Liftoff in ten, nine, eight, seven, six...” Kanzashi, assisting Maya as an operator in the command center, counted down the seconds.

The air was still; their expressions were serious. This was the moment they were waiting for. Energy focused in the catapults, and for a moment, a weightless sensation overtook them, before the anchors spread open like flower petals.

“Three, two, one... Liftoff!” With a loud crack, they flew into the

skies. Already at the maximum speed their engines could afford, they activated their O.V.E.R.S. packs and began to rise out of Earth's gravitational pull.

"I'm counting on you..." As Chifuyu watched them, at arm's length on the monitor but thousands of leagues away, she tried her hardest to shake off a strange sense of impending doom. "Blue Tears units, begin transfer of BT particles to the accelerator. Hold fire until ordered."

"Roger."

With two of the three Blue Tears units under Phantom Task control, it was best to make the normally unspoken clear. But anyway, there was no time left to worry. Mission Control were busy at their stations.

"Internal reports, prepared. Cover story, prepared."

"Operation Candid progress, ninety-five percent."

"Afternoon Blue utilization, steady at seventy percent. Beginning final power up."

"Orbital detachment, energy share link established."

Chifuyu and Maya listened to the status reports through one ear while tracking mission progress. This mission was different. It was life-and-death for the students in their care. Even the smallest detail was vital.

What pushed Excalibur over the edge, anyway? Why now? Chifuyu could only think of one answer. Shinonono Tabane. What kind of genius would she be without a plan? *Very well, then. So I have to...* She couldn't hold anything back either. That much, she had to promise to herself.



"What good is this supposed to be, anyway?" They were almost to the stratosphere, and Ichika looked down at his shield doubtfully.

"They've got mega-hi beams, right? You'd melt like an ice cube without it." Laura's explanation didn't seem to shake Ichika at all. "Anyway, it's supposed to layer with your IS' energy shield and be far more effective than either one alone. You'll be fine. Just have to trust in German engineering."

It was the first time Ichika had ever seen her not quite be confident in what she said.

"Houki. Get Kenran Butou ready to go." Houki was unsettled by Ichika's sudden suggestion.

"Incoming!" At Ichika's shout, the four IS scattered. First a blast of plasma, then a residual tingle, filled the void where they'd been.

"Wh-What the hell was that?!" Laura's eyes flitted over a readout. "Three times expected?! Impossible! We can't—"

"Laura! Get a hold of yourself!"

Swiping the display off to the side, Laura focused on dodging the next salvo.

“Houki! Ling! Don’t let any shots get through to Cecilia!”

“On it!”

Just like Ichika had a shield, the others were outfitted with missile launchers. The warheads were equipped with radar jamming-technology that could block an IS’ sensors... At least, they were supposed to be.

“They’re picking them out of the air!” The beam danced over the battlefield from missile to missile. Giving up on the missiles, the girls purged their remaining ammunition.

No one was happy to have ‘finally made it.’ Not seeing the chaos left in the wake of the beams they’d dodged. A spray of debris. A hail of meteoroids. They may have been through it in a simulator, but real life was far more complex.

“We just need to get close!” Ichika activated Ignition Boost and charged. But his confidence only lasted a moment.

“It’s splitting?!” Excalibur’s blade separated into four, each part its own all-range assault satellite. “Houki! Shields up! Power them with Kenran Butou!”

“Got it!” Houki nodded. But then the unexpected happened. “Wh—?!”

A low shudder shook Akatsubaki as the O.V.E.R.S. pack began to explode.

“That pile of scrap!” Houki quickly purged the pack and brought Kenran Butou up to full power. But that was enough time for Excalibur to pick up an energy signature on Earth. Cecilia’s.

“Dammit!” A quick Ignition Boost, and Ichika was in front of Excalibur, his shield pressed up into its line of fire. “Energy link, full power to Setsura’s shield! We can do it!”

A full-power plasma blast. Ichika met it head-on. But—

“**Ichika!**” Houki, Ling, Laura all screamed.

As he tried to block the massive energy blast all by himself, Ichika’s shield gradually melted away.

“Laura!” Every muscle in Laura’s body tensed as he called out her name. The feeling of dread overcame her. “You can handle this. I believe in you.”

That was the last thing she heard before the light swallowed him.

“**ICHIKAAAAAAAAA!**” Three cries were swallowed by the emptiness of space.





“Vital signs from Orimura... Flatline...” Maya’s voice was hollow with shock.

Chifuyu gazed past her monitor with a thousand-yard stare.
Orimura Ichika was dead.

Chapter IV: Pierce the Azure Heavens, Blue Tears

Chifuyu strode intently through the halls of the base, her eyes blazing with rage.

“Tabane!” She had found her target.

“Oh, hey, Chichan. What’s up?” Tabane was perfectly nonchalant as she sat at a table in the break room, sipping a latte. “These vending machine drinks are terrible. I really wish Kuu was here right now.”

Her thoughts were obviously more on Chloe, deployed on another mission, than anything else. Something deep in Chifuyu snapped as she watched the sheer self-centeredness on display.

“Quit fucking with me! What’s your game here?!” Chifuyu kicked the table over, pinning Tabane to the wall behind her. A fist quickly followed, punching through the sheetrock as she roared in anger. “Don’t you realize what you’ve done?! This isn’t like what happened with Shirokishi! Ichika is... Ichika is dead!”

She could tell she’d been outsmarted, but the fury clouding her eyes hid everything else from her.

“Well, you know...” Tabane rolled her eyes, like she was explaining something to a child. “It’s your fault, Chichan. If you won’t get out there yourself, sacrifices have to be made.”

“Sacrifices?!”

“And this time, it just happened to be Icky. Do you really think you’d be this mad if it was one of the girls?”

Chifuyu winced.

“Well...” They were her students. She cared more for them than almost anything in the world. *Almost* anything. Ichika was on a completely different level. He was vitally important to her. Maybe *too* important to her.

“Houki and the others are still up there, you know. How are they doing? Who’s giving them orders?” Tabane smirked as she awaited Chifuyu’s reaction. And the answer came as a grin. A crazed grin. Tabane was smart enough to tell. She’d broken Chifuyu.

“They’re keeping watch in stealth mode... We’re narrowing down the position from which Excalibur will fire next... We’re referring to it as ‘Zero Point,’” Chifuyu growled.

“That’s the stuff!” Tabane nodded gleefully. “I knew that no matter what happened, you’d never take your mind off the mission. No, really, you’re even better at it than I expected! I just *loooooove* a

woman who can take charge like that.”

Chifuyu didn't have the energy left to snap back at Tabane's cheer.

“Get out of here, Tabane. Before I kill you.”

“Okay, okay. See you around, Chichan! I hope you get involved personally this time. Can't wait to see the IS Kurezakura in action!”

“Shut up!” Tabane was gone before the shout left Chifuyu's lips. Like it had all been a lie. Like it had all been an illusion. “Uuuugh...”

Chifuyu was left alone, shuddering with rage that had no outlet.



[Ichika is dead.]

The realization pierced her heart.

“Ichika...” Tears streamed down Cecilia's face as she sat inside the Afternoon Blue BT particle accelerator. “Why... You promised me...”

She thought back to their conversation just before the mission.

“By the time we wrap this up, it'll be your birthday.”

“You remembered, Ichika?”

“Of course I did. It's hard to forget Christmas Eve,” said Ichika with a smile.

“Ahh... Thank you.”

“Listen, though, I'm sorry. I forgot your present in Japan.”

“No! That's perfectly fine! Just remembering is enough.”

“Doesn't take much to satisfy you, huh?”

“By the way, I'm planning a party here in England.”

“Oh? That's too bad, I only brought my uniform.”

“That's fine! I'll pick something out for you! You'll look every inch the gentleman.”

“Go easy on me...”

His gentle smile. The warmth of his body as they walked together. His composure, always concerned but sometimes teasing. Now, those were—

“I... I can't believe he's gone...” The more she thought of him, the harder the tears came. There was a space left in her heart, and nothing but emptiness to fill it. No matter how hard she yearned for him, no matter what words came to her lips, they would never get through. Ichika was somewhere she couldn't reach. All Cecilia could do was sob at her own powerlessness.



“New orders. Prepare for an all-out assault. We move out in thirty minutes.” Laura's voice was empty, detached as she looked out over the void. It streamed past Houki and Ling, not breaking through their

shell shock. "Are you two listening?!"

They shied back at Laura's sudden anger.

"I... I can't do it. Not Kenran Butou. Not now..." Houki's words trailed off.

Laura flew into a rage, her right hand wrapping around Houki's neck. The plasma dagger on her right arm hummed to life. "Would you rather just die here?! I'm not going to go down without a fight!"

This was enough to spark Ling to action. "What's wrong with you?! Ichika is... Ichika is... He's dead! And you're just fine with that?!"

"Like hell I'm fine with it!" Laura's voice shook with passion. She had a determination born of Ichika's last words. The others may have sunk into despair, but she had no time left for that.

"I know..." she muttered. His decision may have come from trust in her. But it was a cruel decision just the same. One which robbed her of even the chance to shed tears. She resented him for it, but he was no longer there to resent. "There's nothing else left to me..." There was no other option.

The only way to give her life any meaning was to fight. Fight with every ounce of her being. That was the only answer she had for him.

"No matter what. We destroy Excalibur... For Ichika."

"For Ichika."

"For Ichika..."

Houki and Ling wiped away their tears and stared into the distance. They could only look forward. No matter how hard they tried to look back, Ichika would never be there. All that remained was to take down Excalibur, even if they died trying. A determination hammered out from sorrow.

"All right. Let's go over the mission one last time. We make an all-out attack on Excalibur. At the same time, Cecilia attempts to snipe it from the surface. If either of us succeeds, the mission is a success."

The three nodded solemnly. Just as they steeled themselves, an alarm came over the radio.

"Something's happening on Excalibur! We're detecting high energy levels! All units, attack immediately!" It was Maya. Excalibur's recharge had completed an hour before expected, and the busy activity at ground control audible behind her betrayed their panic.

"This is Orimura Chifuyu. H-Hour has been moved up. England expects that every woman will do her duty. Out." Her steely voice gave the signal to attack.



"Mistress, your decision?" Chelsea's question brought Cecilia back to herself. Along with the realization that, if she couldn't focus now,

the operation would have to move ahead without Blue Tears. “There’s no more time.”

“Understood. I... I’ll be fine. Let’s do this.”

“I expected no less of you.”

Off to the side, Madoka watched with disinterest. “Hmph. Not like we would’ve needed you.”

“Bold words.” As if rising to Madoka’s challenge, Cecilia leapt into the cockpit of Blue Tears. “Here goes.”

“Finally,” Madoka yawned.

“I knew you could do it, Mistress.”

Madoka and Chelsea, likewise, took their controls. As they did, a countdown to when Excalibur would fire again popped up.

“Ten minutes left... This’ll be close.” But there was no looking back. Cecilia had reached a determination beyond her sorrow.



“Laura! Take the energy from Kenran Butou!”

“On it!”

A fierce battle was unfolding in the space around Excalibur. The three IS attacked in wave after wave, but it wasn’t enough to break through. An array of cannon drones, almost like bits, swarmed after them as they pushed toward the satellite.

“What do we do?! We’ll never get close enough like this!”

“I know, I know! But we just have to buy time!”

“All we can do is believe in Cecilia!”

Their squad tactics may not have been well-honed, but their determination was enough to paper over the missed timings. It wasn’t enough, though, to win the battle. The drones fired a volley of beams.

“Gah...!” Their target was Laura—an attempt to take the most seasoned veteran out of the fight.

“Laura!”

“Stay back!” she barked. “You two need to finish this!”

“Wait! But you’ll—”

“Don’t worry about me! There’s no time left!”

All Ling and Houki could do was try to make sure that her sacrifice wasn’t in vain.



Where am I?

A void filled with light. I floated in that emptiness. As I did, a voice called out to me, “...ke up.”

My limbs were as heavy as lead. No matter how hard I struggled, I couldn’t move.

Tired... I'm so tired...

Again, the voice called out, "Wake up."

It was familiar. Filled with warmth.

"Please, wake up."

Yet so cruel. If I listened—

"You have to get up!"

I pushed back at the fatigue weighing down on me. Yes. I—



"Excalibur's energy charge is increasing even further!" The desperation echoed in Maya's voice. "We won't make it!"

Blood ran down Chifuyu's clenched fists as her nails dug into her palms.

"Huh?! Wait! Something... Something from the moon is closing in on Zero Point!"

"Enemy reinforcements?!"

"No! It's moving too fast to be an IS! But..." Beside Maya, Kanzashi's fingers danced over an array of ten projection keyboards. "It's broken maximum Ignition Boost speed! Bringing up visual on the main monitor!"

An image of something unlike anything they'd ever seen flickered onto the huge monitor set in the wall.

"An asteroid? No, it looks like some kind of seed..."

No. A flower bud. A seed-shaped flower bud, wrapped in white petals. A spiral of shimmering wisps of energy flew like snowflakes from the tip where its six white petals came together.

"IFF transponder signal acquired! 'White Tail'... GX00?! That— That's Byakushiki! Pilot vital signs are Orimura's!"



Its armor scattered, its function fulfilled, as the bud arrived at Zero Point. And there on the screen, snow-white wings of energy spread, was Ichika. Wrapped around him was Byakushiki's third form, White Tail, with huge energy wings and an absorbed O.V.E.R.S. pack.

"Ahh...!" A sigh escaped Maya's lips. Not just hers. Kanzashi, the operators, even Chifuyu gasped in surprise and relief.

"You're... alive..." Chifuyu had to force herself to not leap and embrace the screen.

And then, Ichika's voice echoed through the control room, "Sorry I kept you waiting!"

Someone let out a wordless shout of joy. No, not someone. Everyone. Cecilia and Madoka, in the Afternoon Blue BT particle accelerator, heard him as well.

"Ichika...!"

"Hmph. Wouldn't have been any fun if that had taken you out, anyway."

The BT energy, responsive to human emotion, swirled around them. Levels were high enough for an orbital shot.

"Kanzashi! Transfer control to Cecilia!"

As soon as Maya spoke, Kanzashi's hands leapt into motion. "Understood. Transferring control!"

Cecilia took over aim of the particle accelerator. And as she did, she sent her view to Ichika up in space.

"Cecilia! Your aim—"

A long-ago conversation.

A bond still strong.

And a shot toward the future.

"—is perfect!" A blue bolt shot toward the heavens.



"We did it!" Laura cheered as she watched the blast of light wash over Excalibur.

"It's not over yet!" Ichika dove toward the half-destroyed Excalibur.

"Wait, Ichika! What are you doing?!"

"I'll explain later! There's something I have to do!" Ichika forced his way into the cramped control room. Inside, he found a pair of girls collapsed, their energy drained away. Forte Sapphire and Daryl Casey. "There you are!"

And one more girl, sleeping in the center of the control room.

"Exia Caliburn... I'm waking you up from this nightmare." He reached out his right hand, wreathed in light. This was his true One-Off Ability, Yuunagi Touya. "If this can reformat any IS..."

Beams of light from his fingertips pierced through her, burning out

the program which had taken root in her body like a disease.

“I’m...?” Exia opened her eyes, and saw Ichika’s gentle smile.

“Goodnight, Exia.”

“Mmm... I’m tired...” The girl drifted off to sleep in Ichika’s embrace.

And that was the end of the Excalibur Incident.



“I was soooooo worried about you!” It was teary-eyed Ling who spoke up during their descent to Earth.

“I know, I know.” Ichika soothed her as they began reentry.

“Ichika... I... I was pretty worried about you too.” Houki wanted attention too, and Ichika smiled at her.

“Thanks, Houki.”

“Y-You don’t have to thank me for it or anything, just...” Her eyes glistened.

“And Laura. You did well. Thanks.”

“I... I just did what you asked of me... *Mumble mumble...*” Laura was at a loss. She turned away, her last few words lost. Just like Ling and Houki, though, there were tears in her eyes.

“**Anyway.**” They spoke in unison. “**Welcome back, Ichika.**”



Meanwhile, on Earth—

“Now, Chelsea Blankett. If you could hand over Dive To Blue.” As soon as they left the particle accelerator, Madoka leveled a lancer bit at Chelsea. It seemed like the ceasefire was over, as well as Chelsea’s usefulness to Phantom Task.

“No thanks.”

“What?”

“I said, no thanks.” In an instant, she faded away. This was Dive To Blue’s one-off ability In The Blue.

“You’re not getting away!” A spear of energy shot forth from the lancer bit, hitting nothing. As Chelsea made her escape, she’d scattered a hail of floating mines which shot toward Madoka like missiles.

“You’ll need more than that!” Chelsea shot back.

Six lancer bits swept them away, but the blasts of flame obscured Madoka’s vision. As they did, Chelsea faded back in, scattering another wave.

“Tch!”

Madoka was forced to dodge back, but as she did, she realized Chelsea’s weak point. *She has to reappear to attack. And—* When

hidden, she couldn't use the bits which were her primary weapons.

"Got you!" A fierce attack blasted Chelsea as she phased back in.

"Ugh!" Chelsea was blown back by the strike. As she struggled to her feet, Madoka closed in, pulling out the Remover she'd tried to use on Ichika.

"If you won't hand it over, I'll tear it off of you."

"Chelsea!" Cecilia pressed her way between them. But with its energy expended, a single punch was enough to blast Blue Tears out of the way.

"Mistress!"

"How useless," Madoka sniffed, full of contempt for bonds, for human connections, for emotion. "Power is all that matters."

Without power, she could do nothing. Without power, she could never return to where she belonged. No matter what, she could never forget that loss—could never accept it. *Someday, I'll grasp it. My own star...* And here was the opportunity to take Cecilia's Blue Tears, too. But before she could, an unexpected obstacle sprung up.

"Hey, hey, hey! It's Tatenashi, arriving fashionably late! How about a barrage?" Her tone was joking, but the explosion was deadly serious. Madoka watched it tear through Afternoon Blue.

"Unlimited, huh."

"What, did you think I was just sightseeing in Russia? At this time of year? C'mon! Let's dance!"

Madoka knew the power of an IS without limiters. She knew the intensity of the battle which awaited her. But she wasn't about to step back.

"Hahaha, I was only here for one IS, but it looks like I'll be taking three!"

"Didn't anyone ever teach you not to count your chickens before they're hatched? Or that giving a speech about how you've already won guarantees that you'll lose?" Tatenashi's graceful fan dance served to scatter explosive nanomachines. Even Madoka, realizing their power, was forced to take to the skies. But it was a predictable move, and as she did, Tatenashi's new ability Cinderella Time drew her in. "Dance! Dance until the clock strikes midnight!" Explosion after explosion after explosion.

Madoka indeed looked like she was dancing as she evaded the towering flames.

"Ugh! You'll pay for this!"

"That's enough, M." Squall Meusel's voice cut in. "Get out of there. I'll pick you up."

"No way! I... I... I—"

"Enough games, M. Time's up. Get out of there." At Squall's insistence, Madoka turned away.

“Tch!” After one final glare at Cecilia and Chelsea, she sped off into the distance.

“That could’ve been bad, but we made it through... Good job, Mysterious Lady.” Last-minute upgrades. A nick-of-time arrival. Suddenly whipping out a new skill. Luck had been on her side. In a real fight, even Tatenashi would’ve been bloodied. “Now all that’s left is to wait for Ichika.”

She watched Chelsea run up to Cecilia. “Mistress! You mustn’t push yourself like that! Please, please take care of yourself.”

“I know, Chelsea. I know.” Cecilia had Chelsea—and their irreplaceable bond—back.



Christmas Eve. Or perhaps the eve of battle. Cecilia’s birthday. Maids rushed to and fro through the halls of the ancient castle as they prepared a feast. It was all for the love of their dear mistress Cecilia. Their pride, their desire, and their duty was serving her to the utmost.

Meanwhile, in a dressing room, the lingerie-clad cadets drew battle lines.

“White or red? That’s the question.” Houki cradled her heavy breasts as she held a dress up before her and looked in the mirror. Her soft curves were contained by a vivid pink bra.

“Yellow’s probably a bit too flashy, isn’t it.” Charlotte wavered between a dress in her signature yellow and one in orange, her toned hips swaying back and forth as she tried different poses.

“Hmm. Black or purple for me? Yeah. One of those.” Laura debated two choices normally too bold for someone with her delicate figure. The advice to compensate by choosing a cut which showed off her shoulders was, of course, her second-in-command Klarissa’s.

“Aqua for me. I wouldn’t mind white either, but I’d like something with sequins or a color gradient.” Tatenashi proudly flounced her chest as she wondered aloud. Her hips, too, were a match for anyone there.

“I’ll go with the one you don’t...” Kanzashi may not have had the most impressive chest, but she made up for it with beautiful legs.

The gentle light of a chandelier danced over the girls’ pale, smooth skin as their playful chatter—‘Which should I pick?’, ‘That one’s nice too!’, ‘How about this?’—filled the air... Until Ling struck a sudden note of discord.

“So why aren’t there any that fit me?!” She was, to put it bluntly, *pissed*.

“Eh?”

“Wait, you mean...”

“In the chest, probably.”

This coming from Laura, who wasn't much better off herself and was clearly trying to draw a precise line she was just on the right side of, was enough to drive Ling to new heights of anger.

"Grrrrrrr!"

The other girls tried to talk Ling down from her outburst. The room was quickly transforming from a paradise of panties, a bliss of bras, to a quite different idea of the afterlife.

"Why's Cecilia get to have her own room, anyway?!"

"I mean, it is her house." The anger at their host was a bit misdirected.

"Whatever, I've got an hour left! I'll just have to patch something together that's my size!"

"Wha?!"

As soon as the inspiration struck Ling, she whipped out a needle, thread, and a pair of shears. "Let's get this done!"

"Hey, wait! I picked that dress!" Houki put up what resistance she could, but Ling was already beyond reach.

"Next up! I want a yellow accent. Charlotte! Gimme some cloth!"

"Gimme"?! Wait, no! Don't cut it up!"

There was no stopping her. *Snip, snip, snip!*

"Don't bring scissors to a gunfight." Laura leveled a pistol at Ling's forehead before the others scrambled to disarm them.

"Why am I not surprised."

"Seriously..."

The Sarashiki sisters let out matching sighs. The remaining hour until the party was a melee in more ways than one.



"I'd like to thank you all for gathering here this evening to celebrate Cecilia Alcott's birthday." As Chelsea spoke, a crowd of high society movers and shakers crowded around the birthday girl.

"Why, Cecilia! You're practically a national hero! I knew you'd make us proud." A woman in her early twenties smiled merrily.

"Cecilia! We seldom see as promising a cadet as you!" A middle-aged soldier respectfully dipped his head.

"Such a shame you didn't have the chance to visit our school while back in the country." A former classmate of hers pouted slightly.

More and more people crowded around her, and she couldn't break free. *Enough of these people! Where is Ichika?* The other hero of the day may have miraculously survived the battle, but it seemed like the pressure of high society was enough to send even him fleeing. As she looked around, she noticed a number of other girls in dresses she'd selected searching for him as well.

"Where did Ichika get to?"

“Jeez, I go through all this trouble to wear a fancy dress and he doesn’t even show up.”

“I’m glad Ichika’s safe, but he hasn’t really seemed like himself since he got back.”

“I noticed that, too.”

“Orimura Ichika, the man who died twice in one day...”

“Kanzashi, let’s not tempt fate like that.”

Cecilia made her home in a glittering world of fame and fortune. A lonely, empty world. But through it all, she’d made dear friends. Found someone to love.

“I couldn’t ask for a better birthday.” No one could get between them tonight. If they tried... Well, death would be preferable. There was no place for someone like that on a night like this.

December 24th.

Cecilia Alcott was now 16. No longer just the young heiress to the Alcott name, but the head of the family in her own right. Soon, the coronet would weigh heavy on her head. But not tonight. This was Christmas Eve. And there was someone she wanted to spend it with.

“If you’ll pardon me.” The surrounding crowd made way for her.

“It was a pleasure, Cecilia. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“And you as well.”

The lady of the house gave a polite curtsy and departed. Searching for a way to find her love, she made her way to a balcony.

“Perhaps I’ll be able to spot him from here.” As her gaze darted around, something suddenly covered her eyes. “Eek!”

“Guess who?” Ichika’s voice was more mischievous than usual. As his hands lifted away, a part of her was regretful. *Just a moment longer...* But a lady must be demure. Certainly, Lady Alcott’s manners were impeccable. No matter how much she yearned to wrap her arms around him, she endured.

“Sorry to tease you like that.”

It seemed like Ichika had taken her silence as reproach, and she quickly stammered out an attempt to reassure him, “N-No! I don’t mind at all!”

“Really?”

“O-Of course. You just surprised me, that’s all.” There was something different about Ichika tonight. Maybe because of his brush with death. But he was growing. Changing. They both were.

“Happy birthday, Cecilia.” Ichika held out a shortcake adorned with a single candle. She could tell that the contrast between the extravagance surrounding them and his simple gift embarrassed him. “It’s nothing compared to what you have here, but... Well, I tried.”

“Oh, you don’t have to compare them! I’m so happy...” It may have been a bit of an overreaction to a hasty gift, but it really did

make her that happy.

“Go ahead, blow out the candle.”

“Of course. If I may.” With a quick puff of breath, she blew out the candle. Ichika handed the cake to her, then clapped. “This is the best birthday I’ve ever had.”

“It must be nice to have so many people here celebrating.”

“It’s nice to have *you* here celebrating.”

It was so direct that even Ichika blushed. For a moment, the two lost themselves in each other’s eyes. There was no one there to get between them.

“Ichika. If I may ask for one other thing? As a birthday present.”

“Yes?”

Cecilia had finally worked up the courage to say it.

“Hold me...”



“Wait, is that Ichika and Cecilia?”

Houki spotted them from across the crowded room and watched from afar. It was, after all, Cecilia’s party. Houki wasn’t rude enough to ruin it for her. *I’m just glad he’s okay...* She was truly grateful for that, at least. They could talk it over. There was no rush. But no sooner did the relief set in than she saw him embrace Cecilia.

“.....!!”

It was a tremendous shock. And then, as the shock sunk in, her eyes began to shine a deep red. Red, red for the Ichika who was embracing Cecilia.



Epilogue: Fairytales of White Tail

“Hmm.”

Tabane watched her sister Houki from afar through a pair of opera glasses.

“This is going perfectly,” she smiled to herself. “We’ll be able to draw out the true power of Akatsubaki.”

She couldn’t have planned it better.

“Let’s go, Kuu.”

“Yes, Tabane.”

The two faded into the night.

“There is one thing I’m surprised about, though.”

“Yes?”

“I thought he was dead for sure. I thought we got him. It’s really funny.” Tabane craned her neck in thought.

Chloe quietly struggled to make sense of her mistress’s plans. Excalibur’s loss of control. The joint operation with Phantom Task. Akatsubaki’s awakening. The world was, for the moment, dancing in the palm of Tabane’s hand. What went on inside the genius inventor Shinonono Tabane’s head? That was something no one but her could understand.



“Do you have a moment, Mistress?” As Cecilia finished changing into her pajamas, Chelsea knocked at her door.

“Just a second.”

“Of course.”

After she finished putting her hair up, Cecilia spoke, “Come in.”

Chelsea quietly opened the door. “I’d like to speak with you about some things.”

“Such as?”

“The facts I discovered. What I uncovered within Phantom Task. And what they mean for the truth about Exia and your parents.”

Cecilia wavered at those last few words. But at the same time, she’d wanted to know the truth about her parents for years. She pressed on.

“Very well. Begin with Exia.” The use of IS as cybernetic enhancements had been banned by international treaty. Cecilia wondered what it could have to do with her parents. And as she did,

another knock sounded at her door.

"It's me, Exia Blankett! I'm coming in!"

"Eh...?"

The door cracked open, and in stepped a young girl in the same maid outfit as Chelsea—Exia.

"Chelsea?! What on earth—"

"Ichika saved her. He saved Exia... No, he saved both of us."

"Pleased to meet you! I'm Exia Blankett!" The girl, whose resemblance to Chelsea was obvious, was nervous. As was natural, as it was her first meeting with her new mistress.

"It's okay, Exia. You can calm down."

"Y-Yes!" Exia took deep breaths, trying to do as her sister instructed. "C-Cecilia!"

"What is it?"

Exia's eyelashes fluttered over round, young eyes as she managed to calm herself enough to speak.

"Um... Your parents... They gave me life as the last blade of the Alcotts!"

Cecilia understood none of the blurted-out confession and replied, "Exia... That doesn't explain anything."

"Sorry, Chelsea..."

"...I'll explain for her." Chelsea recounted the story, deliberately and precisely. Her sister, Exia, had suffered from a congenital heart defect. Cecilia's parents secretly obtained an IS core and implanted it in her. All so she could be Cecilia's strength in the battles she would someday face. Even though it cost them their lives.

"So... So they did it all for my sake."

"Yes. Even though it was treason. In fact, the IS core in Exia came from Phantom Task."

But still, they felt they must. To protect Cecilia. Even at the risk of their own lives.

"But what of the cost to Exia..."

Cecilia's horror was audible, but Exia shook her head from side to side.

"I don't mind at all! I got to be with my sister again, I get to be your maid... And it's all because they gave me new life."

"Exia..." There was a wisdom beyond the girl's years in her eyes, and it tugged at Cecilia's heartstrings. "Thank you, Chelsea. Thank you, Exia. Thank you, Father, Mother."

Cecilia had finally found the truth about their fate, and realizing the love for her it embodied, her tears began to flow. *Father... Mother... I can face the future now.* She was finally at peace with the past.



Later that evening, Ichika was relaxing in a guest room at the Alcott manor.

“Have a minute, Ichika?” A knock sounded at his door, followed by his sister’s voice.

“Sure. What’s up, Chifuyu?”

Opening the door, she stepped toward him, her eyes fixated.

“Ichika. What happened up there? How are you even alive?” Her tone was intently serious.

At first Ichika wanted to dodge the question, but something in her eyes made him come clean.

“I... I was saved,” he answered reticently.

“By who? There was no one—there was nothing up there but you!” Chifuyu could barely form a coherent sentence.

He could tell just how concerned she was for him.

“I don’t know. But they had an IS I’d never seen before. It was... It was a pure white IS.”

Chifuyu recoiled in shock.

Afterword: Gotta Go on a Research Trip

I didn't get to go to Kyoto even though part of Volume 10 was set there! I didn't get to go to Yokohama even though part of Volume 11 was set there! Not Germany, France, or England either! (I did manage a couple virtual trips by tuning into *See the World by Train*.) So this time, I'd really like to make it to the moon! The moon! Moon soldiers out there, I'm waiting for your invitation!

Hey! Izuru Yumizuru here! Lately I've been spending a lot of time just browsing through Wikipedia. But I'm kinda afraid to look at my own entry. I wonder if it's accurate? Just in case, I want you to know that I'm really a dark elf who was known as 'the most beautiful in the southern ninja village.' (Remember to update my entry with this!) Hey, if no one's gonna ask, I may as well come up with some really interesting prompts.

I was one of the quickest writers at my company when I did game scripts, but, after I left, I'm amazed at how much I've slowed down. I kept it up through the second volume of IS or so, but now... Now, it's a good year when I get one volume out. I'm sorry.

Hmm, what else. You should keep in mind that the IS Wiki entry has some pretty big mistakes. I glanced through it enough to realize how much work it needed, and then closed it to make sure none of it got in *my* head. I guess I should write up a big old production bible. Yeah... Maybe? Yeah, maybe not. (Kinda lost my nerve there.)

Anyway, uh. My favorite songstress is Sheryl Nome.

My favorite Servants are Tamamo-no-Mae and Jeanne d'Arc.

My favorite KanMusu are Yuudachi Second Remodel, Zuikaku, and Musashi.

My favorite Mobile Suit is the Neue Ziel.

My favorite Muramasa is Sansei Muramasa.

My favorite Mental Model is Takao.

My favorite Miku outfit is Racing 2015.

My favorite Witches are Barkhorn (especially with her jets) and Marseille.

Best girl in μ 's is, uh, the girl in the hat. (I'm a super casual.) What do you mean 'which one'? You know, the girl in the hat! What, do you remember even less than I do? (Can you even tell which one I'm talking about?) ...Fine. Maki.

Favorite song is Snow Halation.

My favorite Jaeger is Gypsy Danger.

My favorite Panzerfahren style is Miho's.

My favorite bear is Rilakkuma.

Favorite companies are probably Sony and Apple.

And that's about it. Remember to update my Wikipedia entry with these!

And one other important thing. There's three creators who... Honestly, I feel like I'm going a little far just calling out as major influences: Satoru Akahori. Ken Akamatsu. And Nisioisin.

Not that these are the only people who've influenced me, but... Yeah, I wanted to say these three in particular. Anyway, enough about myself!

Oh, and one last thing. Before, my parents had only read IS once it came out, but this time they'll be looking over the galleys. Surprising, isn't it? I definitely wasn't expecting this when I started writing. They're... Well, let's just say they're harsh judges. But that input helped me a lot with Volume 10, so this time I asked them to go over it before publication. I'm honestly pretty nervous.

Anyway, see you next time in IS Volume 12, *Seventh Princess/Akatsubaki Ryoran!* Until then!

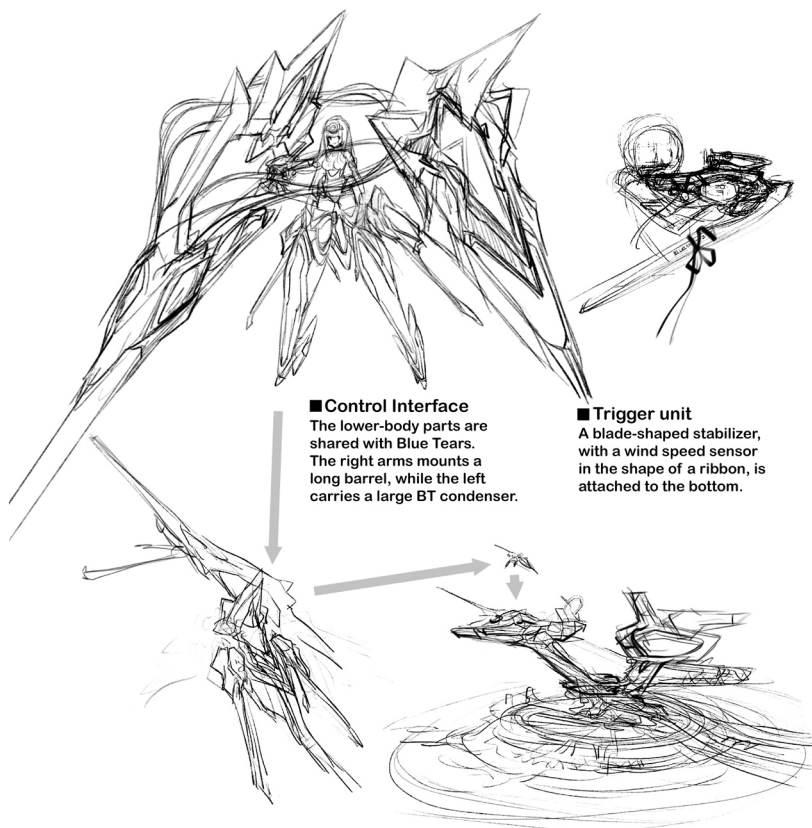
Subject	Date
Celebration of Vol. 11 Release	: My oldest is in elementary school now!
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword	Time
	: Almost time to go to school.
 CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI http://chocolateshop-float.com	

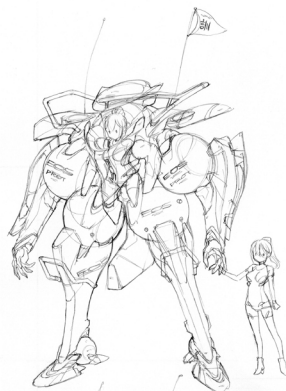
This spring, my oldest daughter started elementary school. I've been busy with work and putting in all-nighters at my studio, and one time I heard her ask my wife "Is daddy coming home tonight?" Sorry! (;ω;) One morning, I was still a little worried about her making it to school so I walked with her partway, and she turned to me and went "Daddy, quit following me around!" (;ω;)



■ IS Academy expeditionary uniform mantles. Worn on deployment to Europe.

Subject Big Grats for the Vol. 11 Release	Date : The falling cherry blossoms are beautiful.
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword	Time : Almost time to head home from school.
CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI http://chocolateshop-float.com	





■ Trainer Prototype



■ Schwarzer Hasen test deployment



■ Schwarzer Hasen combat deployment

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by Izuru Yumizuru

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Edited by Meiru

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INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO

